

ADDRESSING CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM IN NEW MEXICO

Recommendations from Teach Plus Policy Fellows



INTRODUCTION

We are a group of New Mexico charter school teachers and Teach Plus New Mexico Policy Fellows with over 50 years of classroom experience. One of the most pressing challenges we face in our classrooms is chronic absenteeism and the struggles with student attendance. Because these ongoing issues affect schools across the state, we engaged with other New Mexico educators to understand what's working and what's not in their communities.

Specifically in our survey, we looked at how schools take attendance data and use it to inform decisions on staffing and services, as well as what can be done to improve these systems. In this report, we present our findings and recommendations to the New Mexico Legislative Education Study Committee (LESC) and other stakeholders to improve attendance systems, so we can support educators and schools as they better serve their students and families.

FINDINGS

1. Teachers and school leaders are drowning in attendance work—tracking students, following up on absences, and managing the fallout when students miss too much school—all while dealing with complex circumstances beyond their control.
2. A majority of teachers report that they have never been trained on attendance practices. As a result, they don't have a clear or consistent understanding of basic attendance definitions, how the systems work, or what support is available—leaving them unsure how to actually use attendance data to help students.
3. Transportation is a primary barrier keeping students from getting to school regularly, especially for certain student groups, including those living outside busing boundaries, those in rural communities, and some who attend charter schools.

RECOMMENDATIONS

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BACKGROUND

In 2024, the [New Mexico LESC](#) released a report that stated chronic absenteeism in the state grew by 119 percent from 2019 to 2023, the largest increase in the nation, [with more than 124,000 students missing 18 or more school days in 2023](#).¹ Chronic absenteeism—defined nationally as missing 10 percent of school days in an academic year—impacts a significant number of New Mexico's students and is associated with decreased academic proficiency and lower high school graduation rates. [Statewide data](#) for the 2023-24 school year show the chronic absenteeism rate improved from 32 percent the prior year to 29.8 percent, down from pandemic highs but still well above pre-pandemic levels. This indicated that attendance remains a serious challenge for educators and schools in New Mexico.²

METHODOLOGY

In September 2025, Teach Plus New Mexico launched a survey to learn more about the experiences of educators with the attendance systems at their schools, including access to training, data collection and use, and issues impacting attendance. In total, 522 educators completed the survey, with 74 percent from traditional public schools and 57 percent from rural schools. Of the survey respondents, 73 percent have taught for more than 10 years.³

FINDINGS

- 1. Teachers and school leaders are drowning in attendance work—tracking students, following up on absences, and managing the fallout when students miss too much school—all while dealing with complex circumstances beyond their control.**

Expectations for teachers have increased over the years, often requiring them to take on additional responsibilities, like providing additional support and outreach to students who are frequently absent. Teachers often serve as a liaison between school/district/community resources and families, creating strategies and incentives to improve attendance, as well as developing student plans and offering additional supports to fill academic gaps. At the same time, teachers' workload has remained the same and most educators are not trained to effectively deal with these new tasks. While there are grant opportunities aimed to support specific initiatives like improving student attendance, in many schools this funding has not made its way to the classroom.

The New Mexico Public Education Department (NMPED) currently provides grant funding to Local Education Agencies (LEAs) to operate either LEA-level or school-level interventions. While this funding helps support local initiatives that are customizable to meet the needs of local communities, there are a variety of initiatives in place that do not result in the support schools need. For example, districts may use this type of funding for a family-focused marketing campaign encouraging students to attend school more regularly, but this strategy is challenging to evaluate and does not always result in students coming back to school.

“We do not have enough staff to help check the attendance and follow up on it”

—high school career and technical education (CTE) teacher

2. A majority of teachers report that they have never been trained on attendance practices. As a result, they don't have a clear or consistent understanding of basic attendance definitions, how the systems work, or what support is available—leaving them unsure how to actually use attendance data to help students.

More than half of respondents indicated that they have not received any training related to their school attendance system—most schools use either PowerSchool or Synergy—including general use and tracking.⁴ Lack of quality training for accurate understanding of tracking student attendance can impact the accuracy of student attendance data and the larger strategy to improve attendance at school sites. Educators in the survey noted the need for more hands-on training, as well as technical assistance and follow-up support, as key to using student information systems effectively. As one educator shared: *“Effective training must include a follow-up in-person session allowing educators to share and solve issues that arise once the system is in use, as well as, a go-to person(s) other than local admin to contact when issues arise after the follow-up training.”*—elementary English language arts (ELA) and math teacher

Without a shared system of expectations, definitions, and support, educators and schools continue to operate in the dark. In the survey, 43 percent of respondents cited the need for more training or specified training in order to use a new Student Information System effectively. As one educator put it: *“The system and its ease of use factor in, but it shouldn't be crammed into 30 minutes. Teachers need to have their computers and have a way to actually navigate through the system during training.”*—10th grade social studies teacher

In our survey, we identified two major ways in which New Mexico educators use student attendance data. More than half of respondents indicated they use this data to implement attendance interventions/initiatives with families and implement academic interventions/initiatives. Some educators surveyed indicated that they were unaware of how they should use the attendance data or how they as teachers could help improve student attendance. *“I don't do anything with attendance data directly. I do contact the parents and counselor for students (who) are chronically absent and likely failing. Aside from this, I do little with attendance.”*—high school ELA teacher

3. Transportation is a primary barrier keeping students from getting to school regularly, especially for certain student groups, including those living outside busing boundaries, those in rural communities, and some who attend charter schools.

Approximately 25 percent of our respondents identified transportation and busing as issues that create barriers for students to attend school. This includes family scheduling conflicts, lack of access to buses, bus route funding issues, and more.

For young students who live close to their school, families may not be comfortable allowing their child to walk, resulting in absences if the family's personal transportation is not reliable. New Mexico [statute](#) currently sets minimum distance thresholds for mandatory bus service, meaning districts generally are not required to provide transportation unless students live beyond a certain distance from their assigned school: at least 1 mile for K-6 students, 1.5 miles for middle school students, and 2 miles for those in high school.

One survey respondent noted: *"From my perspective as a teacher, some of the biggest barriers that prevent students from coming to school include inconsistent transportation, especially when families rely on limited bus routes."*—6th grade science and social studies teacher

Another stated, *"We are a public charter school and students must have their own way to get to school."*—kindergarten teacher

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Provide clear expectations and a menu of evidence-based strategies for attendance grant spending to ensure funds are used effectively.

By developing a menu of best practices for improving attendance, the state can give districts flexibility to choose what works for their student population, while ensuring strategies remain focused on student support and designed to be evaluated for effectiveness. The menu should include such ideas as dedicated attendance-focused positions (e.g., an attendance liaison), while clarifying the core functions and outcomes the funding is intended to support.

An attendance liaison, for example, would provide direct support to schools by taking on critical work teachers don't have time for: conducting home visits, building relationships with families, connecting students to services, monitoring data for early warning signs, and ensuring accurate attendance reporting to the NMPED.

A specific menu of interventions would also make it possible to track what's working statewide and direct funding toward the strategies that actually improve attendance.

2. Establish statewide expectations for ongoing, high-quality professional development on attendance to build educators' capacity to understand data systems, apply consistent definitions, and use evidence-based interventions.

Our vision for a robust statewide attendance system includes teacher and school staff training, shared definitions and data tracking, and a menu of research-based supports to ensure student attendance is a priority.

In this student-centered system, teacher professional development would also include training on trauma-informed practices and cultural responsiveness—as well as understanding early warning signs of chronic absenteeism and strategies to effectively communicate with families.

3. Implement innovative transportation solutions to get more students to school, including optimizing bus routes for efficiency, improving coordination across school systems, and ensuring charter schools receive equitable transportation funding.

Transportation is a barrier for many students and challenging for many schools and districts, some of which are facing significant bus driver shortages, funding issues, and route issues. Innovative strategies that include community and business partnerships, use of new technologies like AI, and additional funding can help schools and districts overcome these challenges.

Recent studies at [Dartmouth](#) and a program [in a Colorado school district](#) showed that districts using AI reduced the amount of time students spent riding the bus by 37 percent, making district-provided transportation more viable for students and families.⁵ This may be particularly effective for New Mexico's rural schools.

In larger districts, there is a need to adjust bus routes to ensure the youngest learners have access to buses or other transportation options when walking or parent transportation is not a viable option.

Additionally, state funding formulas should support school efforts to provide buses, especially for charter schools that currently receive less money for transportation and, consequently, struggle to offer services to their students and families.

CONCLUSION

Chronic absenteeism continues to take a toll on schools and students in New Mexico, as demonstrated by the survey results we analyzed. To complement NMPED's optional statewide Student Information System, as well as increase accuracy of attendance data, we recommend that lawmakers put in place meaningful training for teachers and other school staff responsible for attendance collection and initiatives, as well as establish a designated position in every school to ensure our students are in class to engage in the learning they deserve.

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Schools and Districts That Participated in the Attendance Survey

Albuquerque Public Schools, Portales Municipal School District, Carlsbad Municipal Schools, Roswell Independent Schools, Cobre Consolidated School District, Las Cruces Public Schools, Farmington Municipal Schools, Silver Consolidated Schools, Belen Consolidated Schools, Deming Public Schools, Magdalena Municipal School District, Socorro Consolidated Schools, Los Alamos Public Schools, Ruidoso Municipal School District, Central Consolidated Schools, Pecos Cyber Academy, Albuquerque Charter Academy, Santa Fe Public Schools, Bloomfield Schools, Gadsden Independent School District, Moriarty Municipal Schools, Rio Gallinas School for Ecology and the Arts, Rio Rancho Public Schools, Santa Rosa Consolidated Schools, Bernalillo Public Schools, Dulce Independent Schools, J Paul Taylor Academy, Las Vegas City Public Schools, Lordsburg Municipal Schools, New America School - Las Cruces, Alamogordo Public Schools, Alma d' Arte Charter High School, Espanola Public Schools, Gallup-McKinley County Schools, Los Lunas Public Schools, Tierra Adentro of NM, Albuquerque Collegiate Charter School, Aldo Leopold Charter School, Aztec Municipal Schools, Clovis Municipal Schools, Elida Municipal Schools, Hobbs Municipal Schools, PMSD, West Las Vegas Public

Schools, Albuquerque School of Excellence, Cesar Chavez Community School, Cimarron Municipal Schools, Dexter Consolidated Schools, Estancia Municipal Schools, Jal Public Schools, Maxwell Municipal Schools, Mesa Vista Consolidated Schools, Mountainair Public Schools, Peñasco Independent School District, Pojoaque Valley Public Schools, Raton Public Schools, Albuquerque Sign Language Academy, Alice King Community School, Artesia Public Schools, ASK Academy, Clayton Municipal Schools, Cuba Independent Schools, Des Moines Municipal Schools, Eddy, Grants Cibola County Schools, Hatch Valley Public Schools, House Municipal Schools, Lovington Public Schools, Mission Achievement and Success Charter School, Middle College High School, Mora Independent Schools, RMSD], Jemez Valley Public Schools, Sandoval Academy of Bilingual Education, School of Dreams Academy, Sun Mountain Community School, Taos International School, Truth or Consequences Municipal Schools, Vista Grande High School, Voz Collegiate Preparatory Charter School, Zuni Public Schools

APPENDIX

Attendance Survey Protocol (September 2025)

1. What best describes your current role?
2. What grade do you teach? Select all that apply.
3. Including the 2024-25 academic year, how many years of teaching experience do you have?
4. Which of the following best describes the location of your school? Urban, Rural, Suburban, Other-Write in Required
5. Which best describes your school? Traditional, Public, Tribal, Private, Other- Write in required
6. What attendance data does your school currently collect and report?
Reason for absence, excused or unexcused, number of days absent, average daily attendance per class/grade, average daily attendance for school, chronic absenteeism, other (write in required).
7. Who is responsible for tracking attendance data at your school?
8. How often do educators at your school building receive student attendance data?
9. How often do families receive attendance data from your school?
10. How effective would you rate your school's current system to take and track attendance data?
12. How confident are you in your understanding of the following:
 - What constitutes a full day absence
 - What constitutes chronic absenteeism
 - What absences are excused
 - How/When to input attendance data
 - What to do when the attendance system is not working
 - What to do when a student is chronically absent
13. How are you currently using attendance data?
14. How much training have you had on taking attendance data in your current district within the last academic year?
15. In your classroom, what are the biggest barriers that prevent students from coming to school?
16. How do families receive access attendance data? How often do they receive it or have access to it?
17. How effective would you rate your school's current system to take and track attendance data?
18. What support will teachers need to use a new Student Information System effectively?

ENDNOTES

- 1 Student Attendance and Performance. (2024). New Mexico Legislative and Finance Committee Program Evaluation No. 24-03. Retrieved from: <https://www.nmlegis.gov/handouts/ALFC%20061124%20Item%2016%20Program%20Evaluation%20-%20Student%20Attendance%20and%20Perfromance.pdf>; NMSU social work students help curb chronic absenteeism in Las Cruces. (2025). New Mexico State University. Retrieved from: https://newsroom.nmsu.edu/news/nmsu-social-work-students-help-curb-chronic-absenteeism-in-las-cruces/s/4c27a761-0c64-490a-a500-19ca0dcb77c9?utm_source=chatgpt.com
- 2 Chronic Absenteeism. New Mexico Children's Cabinet. Retrieved from: https://www.childrenscabinet.nm.gov/educated/chronic-absenteeism/?utm_source=chatgpt.com
- 3 Total survey count - 522 respondents. Q4: Which of the following best describes the location of your school? (Rural - 56.8%, n=292) (Suburban - 14.6%, n=75) (Urban - 24.7%, n=127) (Other - 3.9%, n=20) Q5: Which best describes your school? (Traditional public school - 74.3%, n=388) (Public Charter School - 20.7%, n=108) (Private School - 0.6%, n=3) (Tribal Entities - 0.2%, n=1) (Other - 4.2%, n=2) Q3: Including the 2024-25 academic year, how many years of teaching experience do you have? (More than 20 years - 36.8%, n=182) (10-20 years - 36.4%, n=180) (5-9 years - 14.2%, n=70) (Less than 5 years - 12.6%, n=62)
- 4 Q14: How much training have you had on taking attendance data in your current district within the last academic year? (None - 54.4%, n=282) (1-3 hours - 30.1%, n=156) (More than 3 hours - 15.4%, n=80) Q6: What system does your school currently use to collect data on attendance? (PowerSchool - 66.4%, n=346) (Synergy - 27.1%, n=141) (Infinite Campus - 2.1%, n=11) (Other - 4.4%, n=23)
- 5 Hegde, P. & Vaze, V. (2025). Rural School Bus Routing and Scheduling. Dartmouth College. Retrieved from: <https://arxiv.org/pdf/2507.19538>; Descant, K. (2025). On School Bus Route Planning, Districts Get a Lift From AI. Government Technology. Retrieved from: <https://www.govtech.com/artificial-intelligence/on-school-bus-route-planning-districts-get-a-lift-from-ai>



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