



A Look Back When Community & Philanthropy Focus on Youth Engagement & Chronic Absenteeism

2025

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Section I.

Introduction

The All Kids Thrive initiative, launched by the Princeton Area Community Foundation in 2018, has been a transformative effort to reduce chronic absenteeism in local schools. **Launched with the vision of shifting from responsive to strategic grantmaking, the initiative sought to tackle the root causes of absenteeism by fostering collaboration between schools, nonprofits, and community partners.**

Chronic absenteeism is more than just missed school days; it is often a symptom of systemic challenges, including poverty, housing insecurity, food instability, and trauma. All Kids Thrive aimed to bridge these gaps by supporting grantee-partners in providing wraparound services, addressing both the academic and non-academic needs of students and their families.

Through innovative strategies and a deep commitment to equity, our All Kids Thrive partners impacted the lives of countless students, addressing the many challenges contributing to chronic absenteeism. **\$3 million was invested in this five-year partnership with about 15,000 students benefiting each year.** This made for an incredible learning journey for the Community Foundation, as well as our school district and nonprofit partners. When COVID-19 hit, the initiative—originally focused on removing barriers to in-person attendance—had to be reimaged to ensure students could learn at home, adapt to hybrid environments, and receive the support they needed upon returning to school. This report highlights the achievements, challenges, and lessons learned from this important initiative, offering insights into how we can continue building on this critical work.

Over the course of the initiative, All Kids Thrive supported grantee-partners as they tested new strategies, shared best practices, and built meaningful relationships with students and their families. Through a combination of data-driven interventions, professional development, arts-based engagement, and family outreach, partners worked tirelessly to reduce absenteeism and create environments where every child could thrive. The initiative also revealed the complexities of sustaining these efforts over time, highlighting the importance of school district buy-in, flexible funding, and clear data-sharing practices to maintain long-term impact.

This update documents the journey of the All Kids Thrive initiative, celebrating its successes, acknowledging its challenges, and sharing valuable lessons learned along the way. It also provides insight into the impact of strategic grantmaking and the critical role of partnerships in creating systemic change. Finally, the report highlights several organizations and schools that continue to carry this work forward, ensuring the momentum built through All Kids Thrive is not lost but sustained for the benefit of future generations.

All Kids Thrive Initiative Grantee-Partners¹

Grantee-partners located in Trenton

- Trenton Public Schools Every Day Matters Project: Trenton Public School District, Parent Connect
- Education and Health – Linking Data for Student Success: Trenton Health Team, Trenton Public Schools, Department of Health Services
- Robbins Families Together: Arm in Arm, Robbins Elementary School
- Positive Improvement (and Engagement) Through the Arts: Foundation for Educational Administration, Latin American Legal Defense and Education Fund, Inc (LALDEF), Hedgepeth-Williams Intermediate School
- The Rivera Chronic Absenteeism Program: Mercer Street Friends, Rivera Elementary School
- Connect Trenton: ISLES, The College of New Jersey, The Trenton Prevention Policy Board, Trenton Ninth Grade Academy

Grantee-partners located in Lawrence Township

- Every Child Valued: Every Student, Every Day Initiative: Every Child Valued, Lawrence Township School District, ETS Research and Development Division

Grantee-partners located in Hamilton Township

- Arts Lab: Young Audiences of New Jersey and Eastern Pennsylvania, Hamilton Township School District, Wilson Elementary School, Linchpin Solutions
- Building a Culture Where All Kids Thrive in School and Beyond: BE THERE!: Foundation for Educational Administration, Hamilton Township School District

Grantee-partners located in Princeton

- Princeton YMCA ACE Program: Princeton YMCA, Princeton Public School District, Princeton High School

All Kids Thrive School District Partners

- Trenton Public Schools
- Lawrence Township Public Schools
- Hamilton Township School District
- Princeton Public Schools



¹Metis Associates. Lessons from the Princeton Area Community Foundation All Kids Thrive Initiative: Cumulative Impacts and Policy/Practice Recommendations. Submitted by Artis Bergman, Senior Research Associate, October 2023.

Section II.

Chronic Absenteeism

Understanding chronic absenteeism and its importance is essential before exploring the All Kids Thrive program. Chronic absenteeism refers to students missing 10% or more of the school year for any reason—excused or unexcused—which can severely impact their academic performance, social development, and long-term success.

Studies have shown that as early as preschool, missing just two days of school a month can affect academic performance in later grades. Those preschoolers are less likely to read at grade level in third grade. This trend continues through high school, when chronically absent students are more likely to drop out.

Chronic absenteeism is often a symptom of more profound challenges, such as health issues, family instability, or disengagement from school.

Addressing chronic absenteeism requires more than just tracking attendance; it involves identifying and tackling the barriers preventing students from attending regularly.



Effective public policy and program interventions can curb absenteeism.

Why do students miss school?

- Health challenges (chronic and acute)
- Mental health and wellbeing challenges
- Lack of childcare for siblings
- Unstable housing
- School discipline
- Transportation barriers
- Disengagement
- Struggling academically
- Parental/guardian involvement
- Lack of attendance policy awareness
- Economic barriers
- Lack of interest or relevant material
- School climate and safety concerns
- Cultural and language barriers
- Fear of law enforcement

What happens when kids miss school?

Kids need to be in school. Research shows students who are chronically absent - **missing just 2 days per month, or 10% of the school year** - lose opportunities to succeed throughout their lives.



EARLY CHILDHOOD
ages 0-4



ELEMENTARY
ages 5-10



MIDDLE SCHOOL
ages 11-13



HIGH SCHOOL
ages 14-18



POST-SECONDARY
ages 19-25

Results of Chronic Absenteeism	Erodes Pre-K benefits	Poor reading skills	Lower math test scores	Higher dropout rates	Lower earnings for life
Benefits of Attendance	Shapes the architecture of the brain	Reading enables all future learning	Master core skills, including math	More likely to graduate	College grads have strong job prospects

Section III.

All Kids Thrive

All Kids Thrive was born from a desire to shift from responsive grantmaking to a more strategic model under the leadership of late President and CEO Jeffrey M. Vega. Previously, the Community Foundation funded nonprofit organizations on a competitive basis for operating and/or programmatic support in a manner that was responsive to funding requests presented by the community of partners in the regional ecosystem. The foundation began exploring ways to use grantmaking to address systemic challenges directly. After intentional conversations and interviews with community stakeholders, the Community Foundation identified chronic absenteeism as a pervasive issue impacting students across the K-12 spectrum, with strong correlations to educational disparities. A focus on chronic absenteeism also allowed collaboration across schools, parents, and nonprofits.



Collaboration

Throughout the initiative, the Community Foundation emphasized collaboration by engaging grantee-partners in the development and implementation phases, working closely with schools and communities. Rather than dictating strategies, the foundation required each grantee-partner to secure district approval and board support, ensuring their initiatives were sustainable and well-integrated into the school environment. This deeper scope of work required greater collaboration, partners, and leveraged funding. The Community Foundation committed to multi-year support, but the grant would only cover some aspects of their initiatives.

Over the five years, the Community Foundation maintained ongoing contact with partners, fostering relationships that transformed grantees into collaborative partners rather than competitors. This trust-building allowed grantee-partners to address issues beyond chronic absenteeism, including access to housing, clothing, and other essential needs, underscoring the complex challenges students face.

Data Challenges

One of the most significant learning experiences for the Community Foundation was the challenge of data collection and evaluation. Grantee-partners initially struggled with new data requirements, which demanded more sophisticated analysis and confidentiality measures than many were accustomed to. School districts, likewise, were unfamiliar with sharing data with external partners. The Community Foundation recognized that future initiatives would require more precise data-sharing agreements at the outset and more tailored support for partners in understanding how data could drive impact.

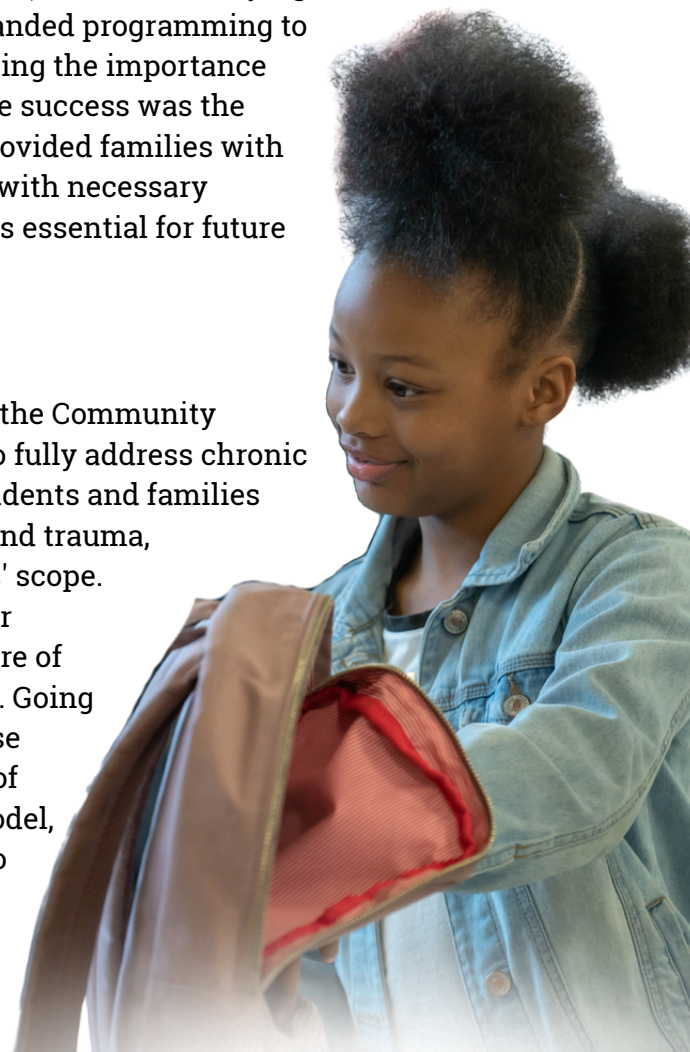
Evaluation

At the start of the All Kids Thrive initiative, the Princeton Area Community Foundation engaged Metis Associates, a national consulting firm specializing in research, evaluation, grant writing, and data management, to serve as the initiative's external evaluator. Throughout the five-year program, Metis collaborated closely with initiative staff and grantee-partners to support the Community Foundation's learning and evaluation goals. Annual data collection efforts included reviewing grantee-partner reports submitted to the Foundation, conducting interviews with district superintendents and grantee representatives, and analyzing notes from convenings and other key documentation. In addition to these core activities, Metis carried out ad-hoc evaluations, such as additional stakeholder interviews and surveys, to gather feedback on the grantee-partners' experiences and assess their relationship with the Community Foundation as both a funder and a driver of organizational learning.

The involvement of Metis Associates as the external evaluator provided technical support, but the Community Foundation realized the importance of having dedicated internal staff—which was added mid-way into the project—to provide real-time assistance and strengthen relationships with partners. **The All Kids Thrive initiative deepened relationships between the Community Foundation, school districts, and grantee-partners, establishing new collaborations and fostering stakeholder trust.** Some grantees even assisted with school operations (translation, calls home to absent students, etc.), further solidifying their relationships with schools. For example, the YMCA expanded programming to include girls after initially focusing on boys, demonstrating the importance of flexibility in meeting students' needs. Another notable success was the creation of the “Navigator” role by Arm in Arm, which provided families with a consistent, bilingual point of contact to connect them with necessary services—a model the Community Foundation believes is essential for future nonprofit work.

Lessons Learned

While the five-year timeline provided valuable insights, the Community Foundation acknowledges that more time was needed to fully address chronic absenteeism, given the deeply embedded challenges students and families face. Many challenges, such as transportation barriers and trauma, require long-term solutions beyond individual programs' scope. The Community Foundation also recognized the need for nonprofits to understand better the cadence and structure of school operations to create more effective interventions. Going forward, the Community Foundation hopes to apply these lessons to new initiatives, mainly through its next step of supporting the expansion of the Community Schools model, which integrates education with wraparound services to support the whole child.



In reflecting on the journey, the Community Foundation emphasizes the importance of strategic grantmaking—staying focused on long-term goals rather than spreading resources across unrelated projects. The foundation aims to continue building on the relationships and lessons from All Kids Thrive by working closely with schools, grantee-partners, and new community school initiatives. Above all, the Community Foundation believes that collaboration and flexibility are essential to making lasting change. Solutions to chronic absenteeism require time, trust, and a willingness to learn together.

Other foundations, nonprofits, and policymakers should not let fear of the unknown prevent them from taking bold steps. Actual progress comes from staying close to the people and organizations driving change and working together to solve even the most complex challenges.

The overall findings demonstrate a consistently high level of outcome achievement throughout the five years of the All Kids Thrive initiative, underscoring the Community Foundation’s significant impact on student attendance through the efforts of its ten grantee-partners. At the peak of the initiative—identified as Year 4—nine out of ten grantee-partners reported measurable reductions in absenteeism among their target students, schools, and communities. Notably, eight of these grantee-partners could sustain this impact into Year 5, even as grant funding was intentionally tapered, highlighting their ability to maintain outcomes beyond the initial funding period. As shown in the chart below, these results reflect a positive trajectory throughout the initiative, with grantee-partners increasing their effectiveness as they refined their program models. They were also able to sustain progress during the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic in Years 2 and 3, ultimately reaching optimal levels of impact in the final two years of the grant.

Perceived Outcome ²	Number of grantees reporting outcome				
	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3	Year 4	Year 5
Improvement in school climate	6	5	3	4	5
Reduction in chronic absenteeism	4	5	not applicable		
Improvement in academic outcomes	5	4	4	6	5
Reduction in absenteeism	5	5	7	9	8
Reduction in tardiness	4	3	3	2	2
Improvements in student or family well-being	not applicable		9	6	4
Improvements in students’ ability to engage in learning	not applicable			3	4

² Metis Associates. Lessons from the Princeton Area Community Foundation All Kids Thrive Initiative: Cumulative Impacts and Policy/Practice Recommendations. Submitted by Artis Bergman, Senior Research Associate, October 2023.

The outcomes measured throughout the All Kids Thrive initiative evolved over its five-year span, demonstrating the Community Foundation's commitment to continuous learning and responsiveness to feedback from grantee-partners.

For instance, while chronic absenteeism was a primary metric in Years 1 and 2, the focus shifted in Year 3 to improvements in student and family well-being, reflecting the changing priorities brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. In Year 4, the initiative further expanded its scope by including improvements in students' ability to engage in learning as a critical outcome, embracing a more holistic view of student engagement. These shifts in measurement priorities illustrate the Community Foundation's adaptive approach, with some outcomes designated as “not applicable” in specific years to align with evolving program goals and the external environment.



Section IV.

Impact and Sustainability

Through this multi-year effort, grantee-partners provided essential services—from food and housing support to technology access, necessitated by the pandemic, and mental health resources—directly impacting students' ability to attend and engage in school. The initiative also helped build stronger relationships between community organizations and school districts, highlighting the importance of wraparound services in addressing the barriers that prevent students from attending school regularly.

Challenges

However, the initiative was not without challenges. COVID-19 disrupted school attendance, and securing accurate data from the school district remained a persistent issue, complicating reporting processes. Grantee-partners highlighted the need for stronger data-sharing agreements between nonprofits and schools to improve the alignment of services and outcomes. They also encountered challenges with defining ownership and roles within the program, as the nonprofit assumed a support role in the school system, without a clear structure for reporting and accountability. The path forward was not linear, and we adjusted to adapt and meet the moment and the need.

Success

Despite these challenges, the All Kids Thrive initiative yielded significant successes, particularly in building trust with families and expanding services. Some projects which focused on connecting families with essential resources, proved invaluable.

One poignant success story involved a young boy with undiagnosed special needs whose frequent absences and behavioral issues were addressed after connecting him with appropriate specialists. The family, which faced language barriers and lacked knowledge of available services, was able to secure the support their child needed, leading to improvements in both attendance and engagement.



Lessons Learned

The Princeton Area Community Foundation regularly convened grantee-partners to provide support, facilitate collaboration, and offer valuable training opportunities. These convenings served as a space for partners to share experiences, exchange best practices, and troubleshoot challenges together. Grantees also benefited from targeted training on topics like logic models, data collection, and evaluation methods, helping them align their work with the initiative's goals. **The collaborative environment fostered during these gatherings strengthened relationships among partners, transforming them from isolated interventions into a network of collaborators working toward a shared mission.** This peer support and learning not only enhanced individual program effectiveness but also built a sense of community and shared accountability across the initiative.

Sustainability has been a significant challenge for many partners now that the grant period has ended. Without continued funding, nonprofits have struggled to maintain the same level of service delivery, especially when addressing the deep-seated issues contributing to absenteeism. Additionally, some partners noted that while they could align their work with school goals during the initiative, sustaining that alignment has proven difficult without ongoing support or formal buy-in from school districts.



All Kids Thrive Grantees

Clearer expectations and a stronger collaboration infrastructure would have been beneficial to ensure these partnerships could continue beyond the life of the grant. Some grantee-partners also noted that future initiatives would benefit if school districts **could deploy** resources and hire dedicated staff to continue the work and better integrate community organizations into school operations.

However, several organizations and schools have found ways to continue this important work beyond the initial grant period, integrating lessons learned into their operations and building on the relationships formed through the initiative.

We are excited to highlight three examples of schools and organizations that are carrying forward the work of All Kids Thrive.

Arm in Arm



Arm In Arm, in Trenton, played a pivotal role in the All Kids Thrive initiative, implementing key strategies to reduce chronic absenteeism and address the underlying barriers students and families face. One of the most impactful strategies was the hiring of a bilingual “navigator” who worked closely with the attendance team at a Trenton elementary school.

Each week, the navigator received lists of absent students and conducted home visits to uncover the root causes behind their absences. These causes often included housing instability, food insecurity, or a lack of basic necessities like clothing. In response, Arm in Arm transformed a local pantry into a resource center, offering essential services and referrals to meet families’ needs. Additionally, the organization adapted during the COVID-19 pandemic, securing funding for laptops, Wi-Fi hotspots, and home deliveries of food, ensuring students could stay connected and engaged with their education from home.

Collaboration with the school district was central to Arm in Arm’s efforts. They worked closely with school leaders and partnered with the principal at the elementary school to support families during critical transitions, such as redistricting, and ensuring students and parents understood their new school assignments. This collaboration extended beyond that specific elementary school, as Arm in Arm began spreading services to additional schools across the district. The organization’s success in navigating complex issues—such as language barriers, transportation challenges, and domestic violence—underscored the importance of wraparound services in addressing chronic absenteeism.

As Arm in Arm reflects on their experience with All Kids Thrive, they emphasize that chronic absenteeism is often a symptom of deeper systemic issues such as poverty, housing instability, and trauma. Addressing these challenges requires meeting families where they are and providing support beyond education, such as housing assistance, food security, and culturally relevant services. Although the All Kids Thrive funding period has ended, Arm in Arm continues to integrate the lessons learned into its broader services, including efforts to create a community hub with navigators to connect families with critical resources. They also remain committed to fostering strong relationships with schools and other organizations, recognizing that collaboration and trust are essential for sustainable impact.

While Arm in Arm successfully folded elements of All Kids Thrive into its larger operations, sustaining the program’s momentum has been difficult without dedicated funders. They noted that future initiatives would benefit from stronger alignment between school districts and nonprofit partners, with funding structures that allow schools to hire support staff directly.



New Jersey Principals and Supervisors Association



The New Jersey Principals and Supervisors Association (NJPSA) implemented a multi-pronged approach to reduce chronic absenteeism as part of the All Kids Thrive initiative. Their strategy included professional development for educators, on-site coaching, data collection, and targeted interventions at both the district and school levels.

NJPSA collaborated with chronic absenteeism expert Michael Godfried from the University of Pennsylvania to train coaches, who then worked with “Be There Teams” formed in all 23 schools in Hamilton. These teams identified the root causes of absenteeism and developed strategies tailored to their students’ needs. NJPSA’s coaches provided ongoing support, meeting with school teams every other month to review data and track progress. Though COVID-19 disrupted in-person efforts, NJPSA adapted by moving operations online and shifting focus to social issues exacerbated by the pandemic, such as poverty and access to food and technology.

One of the most valuable aspects of the initiative was the collaborative problem-solving between coaches, school teams, and administrators. NJPSA emphasized building trust and fostering true partnerships, helping schools develop family-friendly communications and more effective engagement strategies. For example, schools transitioned from punitive, jargon-filled letters to supportive messages that invited families to share their challenges.

By the second year, absenteeism rates had decreased significantly, and NJPSA began identifying trends, such as grade-level transitions (e.g. 8th grade to 9th grade) that posed higher risks for absenteeism. Even after the grant period ended, NJPSA reported that absenteeism rates in most schools remained consistently below the state average, with some reducing chronic absenteeism to single-digit percentages.

Despite these successes, NJPSA faced challenges, particularly around collaboration and data access. Time constraints made it difficult for school teams to meet consistently, and initial resistance from some administrators slowed progress. The pandemic further complicated data collection, with schools struggling to provide accurate information. However, NJPSA created a system to generate monthly data reports for each school, which fostered healthy internal competition and motivated staff to improve attendance. Additionally, they introduced newsletters to share up-to-date strategies and successes, further enhancing collaboration among schools.

Looking forward, NJPSA remains committed to sustaining the progress made through the All Kids Thrive initiative. The program reaffirmed the importance of coaching as a core tactic, not just for reducing absenteeism but for professional development across multiple areas. NJPSA has integrated "train-the-trainer" models to build coaching capacity within schools and will continue hosting statewide summits on chronic absenteeism, creating a platform for sharing best practices beyond the grant's initial scope. Relationships built through All Kids Thrive have also fostered new partnerships, with NJPSA staff now providing support to schools across the state seeking to replicate these strategies.

Hedgepeth-Williams Middle School for the Arts

Hedgepeth-Williams Middle School for the Arts (since renamed Hedgepeth Williams Intermediate School due to district wide restructuring) in Trenton launched an all-out campaign to combat chronic absenteeism, employing a multi-faceted approach that addressed both systemic barriers and individual student needs.

Their strategy combined early intervention with family support, including meeting parents at drop-off and pick-up times, conducting home visits, and providing transportation, food, and clothing. Weekly attendance meetings—exceeding the district's monthly requirement—ensured ongoing collaboration among counselors, nurses, parent liaisons, and district attendance officers to identify and assist chronically absent students. They also implemented incentive programs, offering meaningful rewards, such as field trips, that motivated students to attend. With the help of the All Kids Thrive grant, they could provide incentives that would not have been possible through the school's local budget.

The school's focus on arts and social-emotional learning played a critical role in engaging students. A daily morning meeting became a lively and inclusive space where students were encouraged to participate, dance, or simply observe from the stage. This initiative fostered a sense of community, especially for students who previously struggled to connect with their peers. They also incorporated restorative practices, moving away from punitive discipline toward creative consequences that kept students in school, resulting in a significant reduction in suspensions.



Despite their successes, challenges arose throughout the grant period. COVID-19 disrupted student engagement and complicated data collection, making it difficult to track progress accurately. Support from local churches, partnerships with organizations like Mercer Street Friends, and bilingual counseling were essential in meeting families' needs during the pandemic. Rebuilding relationships and addressing lost socialization time were critical as students reentered school after the pandemic.

Despite administrative hurdles and multiple leadership changes, collaboration between the school and external partners deepened over time, enabling them to overcome obstacles. Sustaining the work has been challenging for the school without continued funding. While many of the partnerships formed during the initiative remain active, the organization relies heavily on external support to maintain their efforts. **They noted that establishing every school as a community school, with robust wraparound services, would create the infrastructure necessary to address chronic absenteeism on a larger scale.**



Section V.

School District Recommendations

Addressing chronic absenteeism requires a comprehensive, collaborative approach beyond individual interventions. School district leaders are critical in fostering environments where students feel supported, engaged, and motivated to attend regularly. To effectively reduce absenteeism, districts must build partnerships with community organizations, adopt equitable practices, and shift away from punitive responses to nonattendance. It is equally important to recognize the evolving challenges students and families face, especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, and adapt academic expectations accordingly. The following recommendations provide actionable strategies that school districts can implement to tackle chronic absenteeism and ensure that every student has the opportunity to thrive.

- **Encourage School-Community Partnerships:** Build strong relationships with community organizations, nonprofits, and local agencies to address barriers to student attendance holistically.
- **Embrace the Community Schools Model:** Adopt the Community Schools model, which integrates academics, health services, social services, and youth development under one roof to meet the comprehensive needs of students and families.
- **Identify and Address Patterns of Inequity in Absenteeism:** Use data to uncover disparities in attendance across different student demographics, such as race, income level, and family immigration status.
- **Involve Board of Education Representatives in Partnerships:** Their involvement ensures alignment with district priorities and fosters support for systemic changes to improve attendance.
- **Transition Away from Punitive Responses to Absenteeism:** Implement restorative approaches that focus on understanding and addressing the root causes of absenteeism.
- **Reframe Post-Pandemic Academic Expectations:** Unrealistic academic pressure can increase stress on students and families, negatively impacting attendance.

Addressing chronic absenteeism requires a multi-faceted approach focusing on re-engaging students, building supportive relationships, and addressing barriers inside and outside the classroom. Across the country, districts have implemented various strategies, from mentoring programs and personalized communication with families to summer learning opportunities and case management. These efforts also emphasize creating a positive school climate, with culturally relevant instruction and safe, healthy environments that foster student engagement and well-being. The following examples highlight how targeted interventions can effectively reduce absenteeism and promote sustained attendance.

Effective Attendance Interventions

Cause	Intervention	Application
Disengagement	Mentoring	New York City – Success Mentors Corps : program incorporating adults from community organizations, such as Americorps, trained school staff, and 11th-grade students. A study found that students with histories of chronic absenteeism attended school an average of two additional weeks in the year(s) they had a mentor ⁹ .
	Communication & outreach	West Virginia calls home after one absence ¹⁰ , and Iowa requires a meeting with parents/guardians whose kids are in danger of becoming chronically absent ¹¹ . WV regulations IA law
	Before, after, and summer school	Summer math programs increased school attendance throughout the year ¹² .
	Case management	Baltimore City Public Schools' absenteeism dropped by 9% through parent calls, home visits, incentives, and 1:1 meetings with chronically absent students and their families. ¹³ In Nevada, Clark County School District manages family engagement centers for wraparound services ¹⁴ , and family support centers for students' social, physiological, emotional, and linguistic needs. ¹⁵
School climate	Provide culturally relevant instruction and programming	Culturally relevant instruction increases engagement, academic achievement & attendance. ¹⁶
	Provide a safe and healthy learning environment	Overheated classrooms decrease learning ¹⁷ ; air pollution interferes with brain development and can lead to learning deficits and suspensions ¹⁸ , and exacerbate chronic absenteeism ¹⁹ .

⁹ <https://new.every1graduates.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/NYC-Chronic-Absenteeism-Impact-Report.pdf>

¹⁰ <https://wvpublic.org/new-law-aims-to-keep-kids-in-school/>

¹¹ <https://www.thegazette.com/k/new-state-law-aims-to-reduce-chronic-absenteeism-in-schools/>

¹² <https://edworkingpapers.com/sites/default/files/ai21-379.pdf>

¹³ <https://www.wypr.org/wypr-news/2024-05-02/baltimores-mayor-challenged-schools-to-raise-attendance-they-delivered>

¹⁴ <https://engage.ccsd.net/familyengagementcenters/>

¹⁵ <https://familysc.ccsd.net/>

¹⁶ <https://www.pnas.org/doi/full/10.1073/pnas.2026386118>

¹⁷ <https://scholar.harvard.edu/files/joshuagoodman/files/w24639.pdf>

¹⁸ <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/how-exposure-to-pollution-affects-educational-outcomes-and-inequality/>

¹⁹ <https://www.attendanceworks.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/ijerph-14-00207-v2.pdf>

Section VI.

Nonprofit Sector Recommendations

Nonprofits play a vital role in addressing systemic issues within their communities, but to be effective participants in collaborative initiatives—particularly those offering multi-year grantmaking—they must be prepared to engage deeply, sustain long-term efforts, and align with the goals of larger partnerships. These initiatives often bring together diverse stakeholders, including foundations, government agencies, and community organizations, to tackle complex social challenges. Nonprofits must demonstrate readiness regarding capacity, flexibility, and a commitment to shared goals. Below are some key recommendations to ensure nonprofits are well-positioned to participate in these collaborative efforts and maximize the impact of multi-year funding opportunities³:

- **Strengthen Organizational Infrastructure:** Build robust internal systems, including finance, governance, and operations, to manage multi-year grants effectively.
- **Develop a Strategic Plan Aligned with Collaboration Goals:** Ensure your organization's mission and strategic plan includes goals to address the specific issues faced by students in your partner school.
- **Invest in Staff Capacity and Professional Development:** Equip staff with the skills to engage in complex, multi-stakeholder collaborations, including project management, communication, data analysis, and navigating and contributing to collective impact frameworks.
- **Prioritize Data Collection and Outcome Measurement:** Develop a robust evaluation framework to measure your organization's impact.
- **Foster Partnerships and Relationships:** Building solid and trust-based relationships before entering a collaborative initiative enhances your organization's ability to achieve shared objectives.
- **Engage in Policy Advocacy and Systems Change Efforts:** Multi-year partnerships often aim to influence broader systems, and nonprofits should be ready to contribute to these efforts through advocacy, education, and policy work.
- **Prepare for Sustainability Beyond the Grant Period:** Identify alternative funding sources and long-term strategies to ensure your organization's continued impact, even after the grant concludes.

Overall, nonprofits must remain flexible and adaptable as multi-year initiatives often evolve. This means being open to adjusting strategies or approaches in response to new challenges, shifts in the collaboration's focus, or changing community needs. Flexibility allows organizations to stay aligned with the partnership's goals and ensures they can effectively contribute to long-term impact, even as circumstances change.

³Metis Associates. Lessons from the Princeton Area Community Foundation All Kids Thrive Initiative: Cumulative Impacts and Policy/Practice Recommendations. Submitted by Artis Bergman, Senior Research Associate, October 2023.



Section VII.

Public Policy Recommendations

Chronic absenteeism is a complex issue that requires coordinated efforts between schools, community organizations, and government agencies. Elected officials can play a critical role in addressing the root causes of absenteeism by implementing policies that remove barriers to attendance, promote collaboration, and provide targeted support to vulnerable students and their families. Below is a set of policy recommendations that can help reduce chronic absenteeism and support student success across New Jersey⁴:

- **Expand the Community Schools Model:** Encourage the adoption and expansion of the Community Schools model, which provides wraparound services to meet student's academic and non-academic needs.
- **Facilitate Data Sharing Between Districts and Community Partners:** Reduce legal and logistical barriers to data sharing to enable effective collaboration between schools and community organizations.
- **Establish a Statewide Attendance Policy:** Develop an updated, consistent attendance policy for all school districts within New Jersey, ensuring clear guidance and alignment in how attendance is tracked and addressed.
- **Recognize the Needs of Recently Arrived Families:** Ensure attendance policies are flexible and considerate of the unique challenges faced by recently arrived families, including refugees, asylum seekers, and undocumented immigrants, by providing targeted support and resources to these communities.
- **Create a Chronic Absenteeism Task Force:** Establish a state-level task force to research the complexity of chronic absenteeism and convene a think tank of educators, policymakers, and advocates to develop effective legislative solutions for schools and districts (introduced in New Jersey in October 2024⁵).
- **Incorporate NJ Culture and Climate Survey Results in School Metrics:** Consider using the NJ Culture and Climate Survey results as a key metric in school performance evaluations, recognizing that positive school environments directly impact student attendance.
- **Increase Access to Free School Transportation:** Provide greater access to free, reliable transportation services, ensuring transportation challenges are not barriers to attendance.
- **Expand Attendance Teams to All Schools:** Allocate funding to support the implementation of attendance teams in every school, enabling proactive interventions and personalized support for students struggling with chronic absenteeism.

Policy should not be made in a silo; to develop effective solutions, policymakers must actively engage with practitioners and those working directly in the field to address chronic absenteeism. Educators, school administrators, social workers, and community partners have

⁴ Metis Associates. Lessons from the Princeton Area Community Foundation All Kids Thrive Initiative: Cumulative Impacts and Policy/Practice Recommendations. Submitted by Artis Bergman, Senior Research Associate, October 2023.

⁵ https://pub.njleg.state.nj.us/Bills/2024/S4000/3776_IL.PDF

invaluable insights into students' and families' day-to-day realities and challenges. These frontline practitioners understand what interventions are most effective and where barriers to attendance persist, making their perspectives critical to shaping impactful policy.

Policymakers should consult with these stakeholders early and often, gathering input on what supports are needed to drive change and sustain success. This collaborative, ground-up approach ensures that policies are practical, responsive, and aligned with the needs of the communities they aim to serve, ultimately leading to more effective and sustainable outcomes.



Several states nationwide have introduced innovative legislation to reduce chronic absenteeism by addressing its root causes. These policies focus on improving access to transportation, enhancing school-community partnerships, expanding mental health services, and shifting from punitive measures to restorative approaches—offering models that can be adapted and implemented to support student attendance and engagement in NJ.

Cause	Intervention	Application
Physical illness & mental health	In-school check-ups or referrals	Colorado S142 : pilot program offering dental screenings to students K-3 (status: enacted June 2024) Rhode Island H7289 : pilot outreach program directly offering chronically absent students home, mental health & other resources. (status: introduced January 2024)
Lack of childcare	Subsidized or free childcare	Connecticut & Kentucky laws subsidize childcare costs through employers, employees, and the state government. CT regulations KY regulations
School discipline	Require alternatives to suspension and expulsion	Alabama SB165 ; Arizona HB 2218 : students would no longer be suspended due to absenteeism (status: introduced February 2024) Utah HB0362 requires schools to refer truant students to prevention and early intervention youth services (status: enacted March 2024)
Transportation	Provide free and reliable transportation	Hawaii HB 1797 : appropriates funds to the Department of Education to strengthen student transportation services for Hawaii's public school system (status: deferred February 2024)
Lack of attendance policy awareness	Data Monitoring	Minnesota's H3827 , introduced in February 2024, proposes a program mandating schools collect absenteeism data by age, gender, race, disability, homelessness status, English language learner status, and eligibility for free school meals, ⁶ this would allow for targeted interventions and attendance policy education based on student demographics.
School discipline	Wraparound support	Suspensions interfere with learning and disengage all students in the classroom ⁷ . However, many states allow and some require truant students to be disciplined. In turn, already truant students miss additional instruction and are at risk of further disengagement. Ohio has replaced truancy-related suspensions and expulsions with targeted interventions, including cognitive behavioral therapy, mentoring, case management, and more ⁸ .

⁶https://custom.statenet.com/public/resources.cgi?mode=show_text&id=ID:bill:MN2023000H3827&verid=MN2023000H3827_20240215_0_I&

⁷<https://edworkingpapers.com/sites/default/files/ai22-563.pdf>

⁸<https://www.escneo.org/AttendanceHB410.aspx#:~:text=HB%20410%27s%20truancy%20provisions%20bring,students%20with%20truancy%20issues%20and>

Section VIII.

Philanthropy as a Catalyst

Philanthropy has a unique opportunity to catalyze systemic change through strategic grantmaking by leveraging its resources, influence, and long-term commitment to solving complex social challenges. Unlike short-term or project-based funding, strategic, multi-year grantmaking enables foundations to invest deeply in solutions that address the root causes of systemic issues. This approach allows philanthropy to move beyond symptom relief and work toward lasting transformative impact by supporting organizations that tackle underlying inequities, build sustainable infrastructure, and drive policy and community change.

As philanthropy increasingly turns to multi-year strategic grantmaking to address systemic challenges in their communities, careful planning and intentionality are required to ensure these initiatives lead to meaningful change. These initiatives demand a commitment to long-term partnership, capacity building, and adaptability. Below is a list of recommendations that philanthropy can use when considering launching multi-year strategic grantmaking initiatives²⁰:

- **Leverage Pre-Existing Relationships:** Build on established connections with civic leaders, nonprofit organizations, school districts and community stakeholders to foster collaboration and buy-in.
- **Assess Organizational Capacity and Cohort Dynamics:** When selecting grantee-partners, consider their capacity to execute long-term interventions and the cohort's collective and diverse strengths.
- **Provide a Thorough Planning Period:** A planning grant allows grantee-partners ample time to plan before launching their interventions.
- **Invest in Technical Assistance and Capacity Building:** Throughout the initiative, provide technical assistance and capacity-building opportunities for grantee-partners.
- **Demonstrate Flexibility and Responsiveness:** Be open to adjusting grant terms, timelines, and support based on the evolving needs of grantee-partners.
- **Develop Cross-Grantee Branding and Public Awareness Campaigns:** Create a unified branding and communications strategy that promotes the work of all grantees under the initiative.
- **Grow Internal Capacity for Partnership:** Having a dedicated staff member at the foundation as the primary point of contact for grantee-partners is essential for fostering strong communication, providing consistent support, and ensuring alignment between the foundation's goals and the partners' efforts throughout the initiative.
- **Invest in External Evaluation for Impact Measurement:** Engage external evaluators from the outset to ensure rigorous data collection and impact measurement.
- **Cultivate a Culture of Reflection and Peer Engagement:** From the beginning, intentionally support opportunities for grantees to reflect on their work, share insights, and engage with peers.

²⁰Metis Associates. Lessons from the Princeton Area Community Foundation All Kids Thrive Initiative: Cumulative Impacts and Policy/Practice Recommendations. Submitted by Artis Bergman, Senior Research Associate, October 2023.

Before developing new initiatives or shifting grantmaking priorities, philanthropic organizations must engage in meaningful conversations with current and prospective partners. Grantmakers can serve a critical role as convener to foster collaboration and increase collective impact. Nonprofits and community organizations are often on the front lines of addressing systemic challenges, providing critical insights into emerging needs, potential gaps, and what has been working on the ground. Checking in with these partners ensures that new strategies align with the realities of those doing the work and prevents the foundation from unintentionally disrupting ongoing efforts. Regular consultation fosters trust, transparency, and mutual respect, enabling philanthropy to co-create solutions with its partners rather than imposing top-down changes.



The Community Foundation and All Kids Thrive grantee partners at the Foundation for Educational Administration's (FEA) Statewide Chronic Absenteeism Summit

Section IX.

Conclusion

The All Kids Thrive initiative has demonstrated the power of collaboration, learning, and adaptability in addressing chronic absenteeism. Still, it also highlights that more than five years may be needed to achieve and sustain a long-term impact on strategic grantmaking efforts. We will consider longer horizons moving forward. Success in these complex initiatives requires open communication across all stakeholders—foundations, grantee-partners, school boards, and community organizations. Clear data-sharing agreements must be established to enable effective collaboration and monitoring. Flexibility is also essential, as external factors, such as the COVID-19 pandemic, will inevitably influence the work. Philanthropic institutions, school boards, nonprofits, and legislatures should not let fear of challenges prevent them from pursuing transformative solutions.



Chronic absenteeism is a chronic symptom of a systemic issue embedded in our educational culture and the infrastructure of how we deliver education. It's tied to economic challenges and a range of social, medical, and healthcare issues."

- Sonia Delgado, Trustee

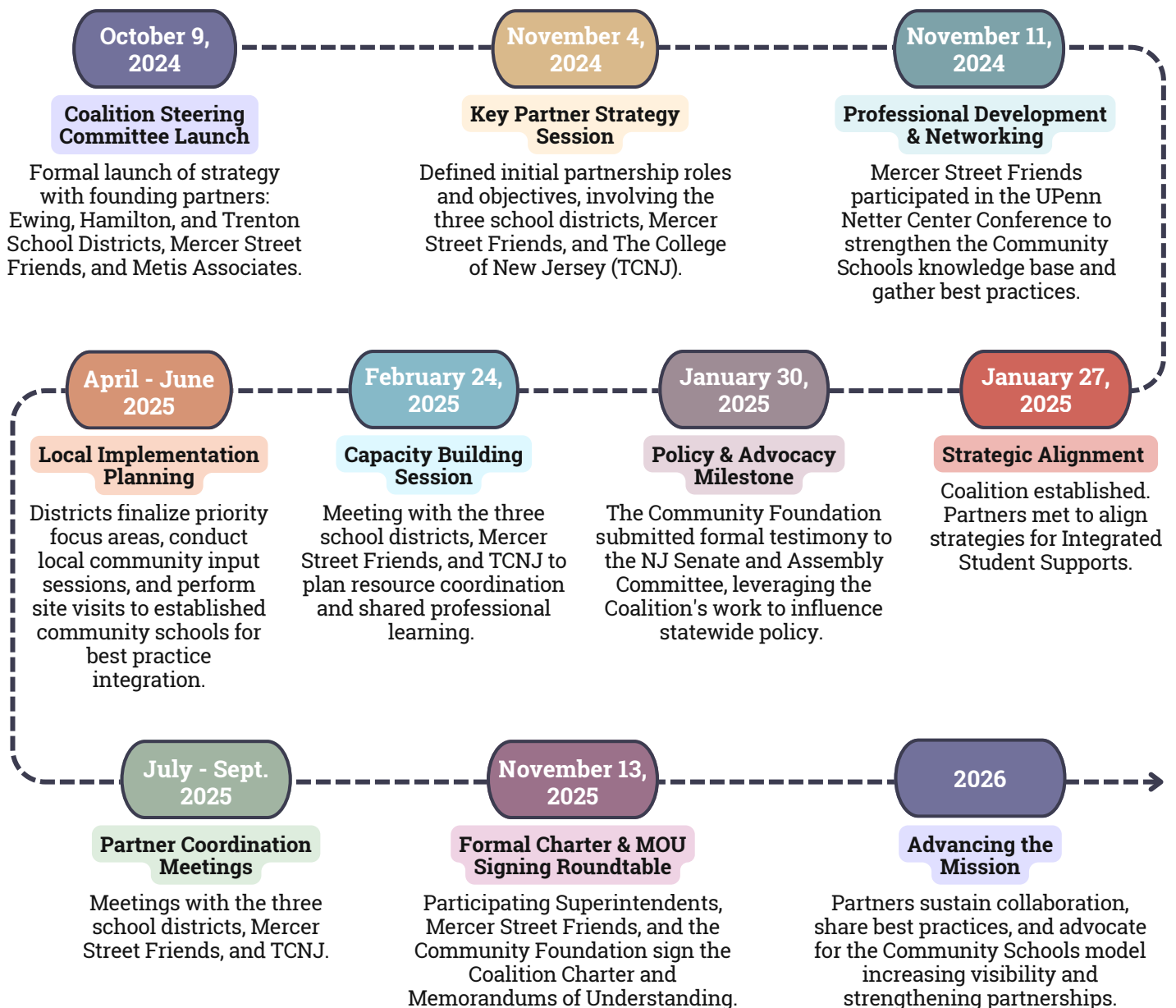
There is no single solution—or silver bullet—for addressing chronic absenteeism, as the challenges students and families face are multifaceted and require coordinated efforts to overcome. Meaningful progress depends on collaboration among schools, community organizations, families, and policymakers to create sustainable solutions. Many barriers to attendance, such as mental health needs, housing instability, and family responsibilities, require wraparound services to ensure students can thrive inside and outside the classroom. With this in mind, the Princeton Area Community Foundation will prioritize supporting the expansion of the Community Schools model, recognizing it as a robust framework for addressing these interconnected challenges and promoting long-term student success. The key is to remain in community and proximity with practitioners, listen to those working on the ground, and co-create solutions together. Real progress happens when we are willing to learn, adapt, and work hand-in-hand toward a shared vision.

Section X.

Community Schools

A Look Forward

We've partnered with three local school districts (Trenton, Hamilton, and Ewing), Mercer Street Friends and The College of New Jersey to form THE Mercer Community School Coalition.



The Coalition believes this model, in which a coordinator works in the district, and serves to link students and families with outside, needed services – for example, food pantries and health clinics – will benefit educators, students and families.

Teachers can focus on classroom instruction.

The coordinators are trusted partners between school districts and nonprofits.

Students and their families get the services they need, including help to overcome some of the barriers that prevent kids from getting to school.

To learn more about All Kids Thrive, visit www.pacf.org/akt.





Partners from Ewing, Hamilton, and Trenton School Districts, Mercer Street Friends, and The College of New Jersey come together to strategize on next steps for Community Schools.



We dedicate this report to the memory of Jeffrey M. Vega, a tireless advocate for equity, community, and opportunity. He was the Community Foundation President & CEO from 2015 until his untimely passing in 2024. The Jeffrey M. Vega Memorial Fund at the Community Foundation was set up to honor his memory and support our work.





The Princeton Area Community Foundation makes more...

quality education

arts and culture

green spaces and environmental action

nutritious meals

health initiatives

disaster relief

strong nonprofits

after school and summer programs

good

...possible

through the power
of collective giving.



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