

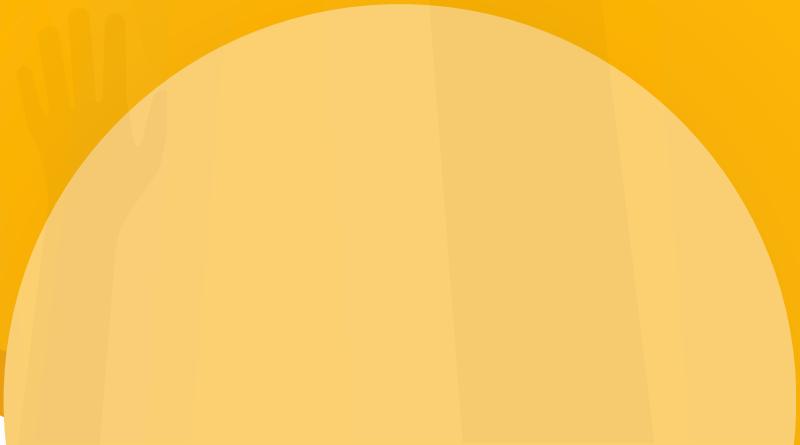
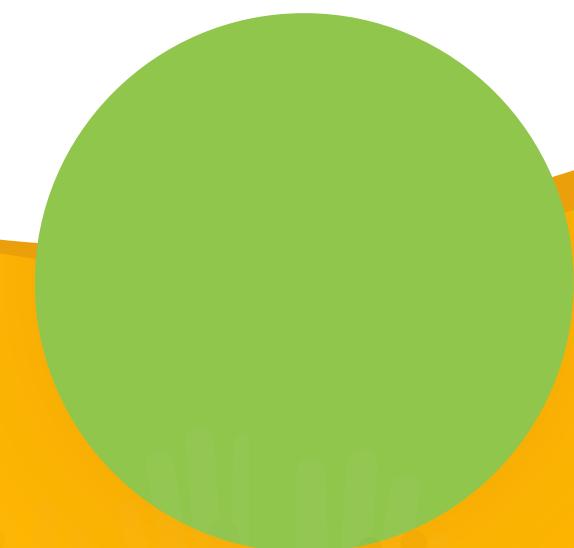


# REIMAGINING ATTENDANCE

*A Strategic Framework to Address*

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**Chronic Absenteeism at  
Lighthouse Community Public Schools**



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# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We extend our sincere gratitude to the many individuals who contributed their knowledge, time, and energy in supporting the completion of the Research and Discovery phase of this project.

## **Lighthouse Community Public Schools (LCPS)**

- **District Leadership:** For their commitment to tackling chronic absenteeism and supporting a culture of belonging and engagement.
- **School Site Administrators and Staff:** For their collaboration during discovery and implementation activities.
- **Teachers and Support Staff:** For their frontline insights and dedication to student success.
- **Families and Students:** Especially those who participated in interviews and focus groups, for generously sharing their experiences and ideas.

## **Oakland Natives Give Back (ONGB)**

Oakland Natives Give Back is an independent 501(c)(3) non-profit organization dedicated to serving communities across the nation through efforts to reduce educational disparities. Our mission is to create and scale innovative solutions that empower young people and improve educational equity.

**The Attendance Learning Institute (ALI),** ONGB's hub for attendance initiatives—fosters cross-sector collaboration, promotes culturally responsive practices, and delivers professional development to equip school systems with the tools to combat chronic absenteeism. ALI's objective is to provide professional development and capacity-building support so that district administrators, principals, teachers, community partners, and others can take action to increase daily school attendance rates.

### **ONGB Project Team:**

- Dr. Nyeisha DeWitt, Founder & CEO
- Dr. Chyna Hill, Chief Officer of Organizational Effectiveness
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Oakland Natives Give Back ([ongb.org](http://ongb.org)) is a collection of innovative, community-first programs and funds designed to combine community efforts to help inspire, educate, and uplift future leaders.

# Executive Summary

This report synthesizes insights from focus groups and interviews with students, caregivers, and staff at Lighthouse Community Public Schools to examine the root causes of chronic absenteeism. The findings reveal that absenteeism reflects issues with connection, capacity, and care.

Participants consistently pointed to external, systemic barriers as the main drivers of student absences: health issues, housing instability, transportation challenges, and immigration-related fears. These are not occasional disruptions but chronic realities for many families. Students also cited emotional exhaustion, disengagement, and inconsistent support at school as contributing factors. When students don't feel safe, seen, or supported, school can feel like another source of stress rather than stability.

Despite existing interventions—such as incentive programs and staff outreach—efforts are hindered by staffing shortages, inconsistent implementation, and lack of coordination. Office managers juggle attendance and follow-up with multiple responsibilities, while attendance incentives are often applied inconsistently or lack relevance across age groups. Most critically, confusion remains about what constitutes chronic absenteeism. Many families and even some staff are unaware that excused absences count, or that missing just two days a month can meet the threshold—limiting early intervention opportunities.

## Stakeholders offered clear, actionable recommendations:



ONE	TWO	THREE	FOUR	FIVE
Proactive, personalized communication with families	Clearer definitions and guidance on attendance metrics	Dedicated staff to manage attendance efforts	Expanded infrastructure, such as morning care and transportation support	Stronger relationships between students, families, and school staff

The message from all groups was unified: **chronic absenteeism is not about apathy—it's about access.** Addressing it requires moving beyond surveillance and toward systems of support rooted in empathy and equity.

Lighthouse has a unique opportunity to lead by reimagining its approach to attendance. With structural investments, aligned communication, and culturally responsive practices, the school can shift the focus from blame to belonging — and build an environment where every student wants to show up.

# Background

Chronic absenteeism is a growing concern across school districts nationwide, and its consequences are far-reaching—impacting student achievement, school funding, and long-term outcomes for children and families.

This issue is particularly urgent in schools serving historically marginalized communities, where systemic barriers intersect with structural inequities. In this context, Oakland Natives Give Back (ONGB) partnered with Lighthouse Community Public Schools to launch a targeted information collection effort to explore the causes and impacts of chronic absenteeism within the Lighthouse school community.

This initiative marks the early implementation phase of a three-year collaboration between ONGB and Lighthouse aimed at improving school attendance outcomes.

To better understand the underlying factors contributing to absenteeism, ONGB conducted a series of surveys, interviews, and focus groups with school staff, students, and parents. These sessions were designed to elevate lived experiences and gather insights directly from those most affected by attendance-related challenges.

The research seeks to identify both systemic and situational barriers — ranging from health and transportation issues to family engagement gaps and school climate concerns. It also aims to surface culturally responsive, community-informed strategies that can better support students and families in overcoming these challenges. Participants were assured of full confidentiality, with verbal consent obtained before recordings, and all identifying information omitted from reports.

## CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM

Defined as missing 10% or more of the school year for any reason (excused or unexcused), chronic absenteeism is often an early warning sign of academic disengagement and future dropout risk.

In California,  
over **30%**

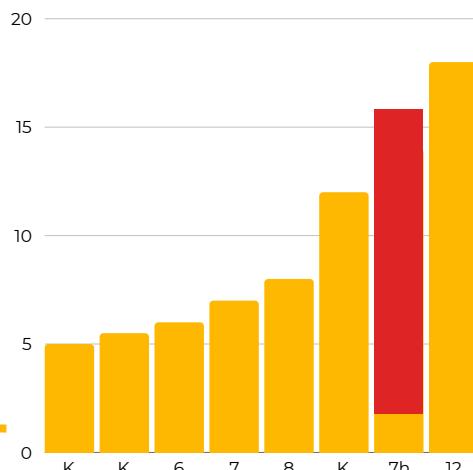


of students were chronically absent during the 2021-22 school year - a dramatic increase from pre-pandemic rates.

# CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM

## WHAT THE DATA SHOWS

Grade-level analysis reveals that chronic absenteeism peaks during the middle school years, with 7th and 8th grades accounting for nearly **20%** of all cases.



Attendance rate clusters further illustrate the problem:

hover just below the 90% attendance threshold-qualifying them as chronically absent even if they are only missing on two days each month.



This finding suggests that chronic absenteeism may **not always be recognized or addressed** enough, as moderate but consistent absences.

Despite misconceptions, behavior does not appear to be a primary driver: over 97% of students had no suspensions, and 75% had no office discipline referrals.



## BACKGROUND

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The data collected from Lighthouse students paints a vivid picture of who is most affected by chronic absenteeism. A staggering 84% of chronically absent students identify as Latino, while nearly 10% are African American—underscoring the racial and ethnic disparities in attendance patterns. English Learners represent nearly 40% of the chronically absent population, highlighting language barriers and the need for targeted supports. Approximately 20% of students identified as chronically absent also have an Individualized Education Plan (IEP), suggesting that students with disabilities are disproportionately affected. Gender data shows a slightly higher rate of chronic absenteeism among female students (56%), and while only a small percentage of students report homelessness (4.5%) or foster care involvement (1.1%), these students face compounded challenges that warrant dedicated attention.

Grade-level analysis reveals that chronic absenteeism peaks during the middle school years, with 7th and 8th grades accounting for nearly 20% of all cases. Attendance rate clusters further illustrate the problem: many students hover just below the 90% attendance threshold—qualifying them as chronically absent even if they are only missing one or two days each month. This finding suggests that chronic absenteeism may not always be recognized or addressed early enough, as moderate but consistent absences add up over time. Despite misconceptions, behavior does not appear to be a primary driver—over 97% of students had no suspensions, and 75% had no office discipline referrals.

Finally, it is important to understand the financial implications of chronic absenteeism for public schools. School funding in California is heavily tied to Average Daily Attendance (ADA), meaning that each absence—regardless of reason—directly reduces the amount of funding a school receives. Many parents and even some staff are unaware of this connection, resulting in a disconnect between attendance behavior and its broader institutional impact. With ONGB's commitment to equity-driven solutions, this research initiative provides a foundation for action—one rooted in authentic community voice, equity-centered analysis, and a clear mandate to address chronic absenteeism as both an educational and economic justice issue.



# Methodology



This study was designed and implemented by Oakland Natives Gives Back (ONGB)

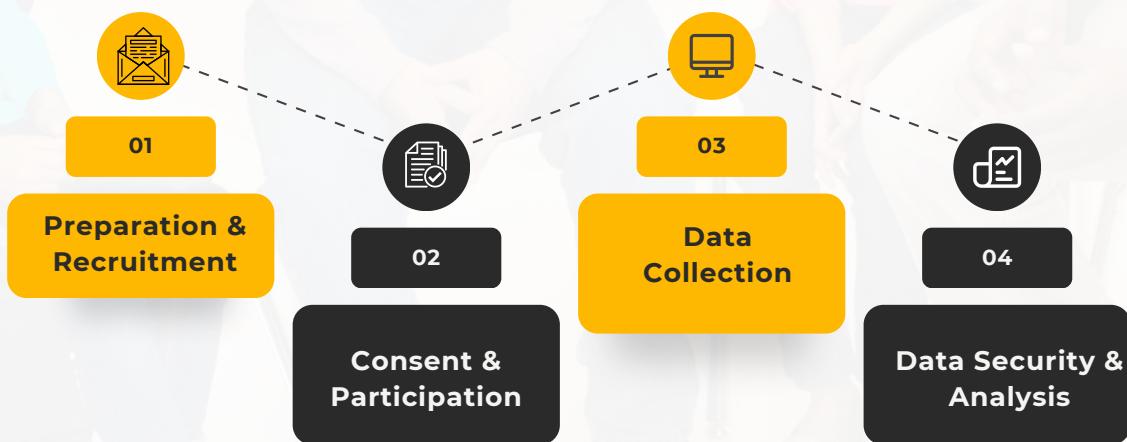
to develop a nuanced understanding of school attendance dynamics at Lighthouse Community Public Schools. The primary aim was to explore the lived experiences of students, parents, and school staff to uncover effective practices, identify persistent challenges, and gather community-informed recommendations to improve attendance outcomes.

To ensure a robust and inclusive analysis, the study employed a mixed-methods approach, combining qualitative and quantitative data collection techniques. The research process was carried out over a five-week period, from April 1 to May 4, and emphasized both rigor and cultural responsiveness in its design.

Data were collected through three key methods: individual interviews, focus groups, and surveys. Interviews provided in-depth, one-on-one engagement and were conducted with twelve staff members and eight students, following a structured protocol. Focus groups were used to create dialogue and facilitate shared reflection among groups of parents and staff. These sessions allowed for collective meaning-making, helping to surface themes that may not have emerged in individual settings. Parent, staff, and student surveys offered both quantitative and qualitative insights into attendance trends, family and staff perceptions, and the range of barriers affecting regular school attendance. These instruments also captured demographic information to contextualize participants' responses.

# METHODOLOGY

All interviews and focus groups followed a consistent and structured protocol developed by ONGB. Recruitment began with email outreach, followed by text messages or phone calls as needed to secure participation. Participants were provided with informed consent materials in advance of their session. At the beginning of each session, researchers reviewed the consent form, confirmed participant understanding, and obtained verbal consent before any audio recording began. For students and families, consent was also obtained via DocuSign when appropriate. Every session was audio-recorded for accuracy, and participants were explicitly informed that their responses would remain confidential and that no identifying information would be included in the final analysis or reporting. Recordings are to be stored securely and deleted within 90 days of collection.



Interviewers were trained to create a respectful and welcoming environment by maintaining a warm, neutral, and non-judgmental tone. Active listening techniques were used throughout the sessions, and participants were encouraged to provide open-ended responses. They were also reminded that participation was voluntary and that they could skip questions or exit the session at any point without consequence. To honor participants' time and insights, all interview and focus group participants received \$20 - \$50 gift cards. All signed consent forms and other sensitive materials were stored securely in a confidential digital folder accessible only to the ONGB research team. The insights generated through this multi-pronged methodology form the basis of the findings presented in this report.

By centering the voices of students, families, and school staff, the research offers a comprehensive and community-informed understanding of chronic absenteeism and the conditions necessary to support improved attendance at Lighthouse Community Public Schools.

# Findings

## Finding 1: Communication Strategies Are Inconsistent and Culturally Misaligned, Limiting Impact



This communication gap is particularly important given the **demographic profile of the student body**, where over 84% of students are Latino and nearly 10% are African American. Families described communication approaches that felt impersonal or insufficiently aligned with their preferences and cultural norms. One parent shared, “In our culture... some people do not even check the emails,” adding that direct, personalized contact—such as phone calls or in-person outreach—would be more effective. Participants recommended more face-to-face engagement, particularly through student conferences or drop-off interactions, which they felt would **build trust and foster mutual understanding**. These findings suggest that while communication is happening, **it is often transactional rather than relational**, a distinction that matters greatly when attempting to influence behavior such as school attendance.

*Data Snapshot:*



84% of students at Lighthouse are Latino

10% of students are African American

National research reinforces these experiences. According to Chang and Romero (2008), **personalized and culturally appropriate outreach** is far more effective in engaging families than generic messaging. Attendance Works (2024) also stresses that multilingual communication, relationship-building, and early outreach are essential strategies in communities with high proportions of English learners and families of color. The interpretation from Lighthouse participants aligns with this literature: **families are more likely to engage when communication feels relevant, affirming, and grounded in empathy** rather than compliance. As one staff member reflected, “The message needs to be more consistent and more streamlined... about the importance of attending school and how that affects grades,” suggesting a desire not only for better frequency but better framing of outreach.

## FINDING #1

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Moreover, several staff and parents described the **lack of immediacy in outreach as a missed opportunity** to intervene early with students trending toward chronic absenteeism. One staff member explained, “Sometimes we notice that they have meetings... not that soon... because we have so many students... it’s hard to meet with parents.” This observation aligns with research by Balfanz and Byrnes (2012), who found that **early intervention—ideally after just two or three absences—dramatically increases the likelihood of re-engaging students**. In the absence of timely, personalized communication, absences continue unchecked; shifting students from occasional to chronically absent before supports are activated. The Lighthouse case suggests that staff capacity limits and the sheer volume of cases are preventing the kind of **responsive, high-touch outreach** necessary to effectively support families.



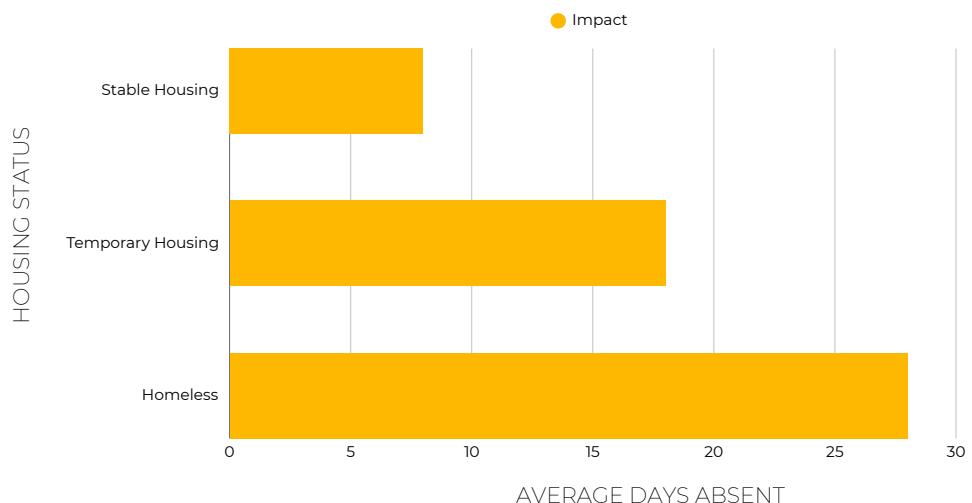
These findings indicate that **communication systems, while present, are not yet fully functional as engagement tools**. They operate more as notifications than invitations—delivering information but not necessarily building connections. Without addressing this cultural and relational misalignment, outreach will continue to miss its mark, particularly for families navigating language barriers, digital access challenges, or cultural norms that value direct interpersonal contact over written or automated communication. To improve attendance, **the communication approach must evolve from informing to engaging—from transactional to transformative**. Participants made clear that this shift requires not just new tools, but new mindsets and staffing strategies that center family voice, trust, and early action.

# Findings

Finding 2: External Barriers—Including Health, Transportation, and Housing Instability—Remain the Most Persistent and Under-Resourced Drivers of Chronic Absenteeism

## ATTENDANCE CHALLENGES

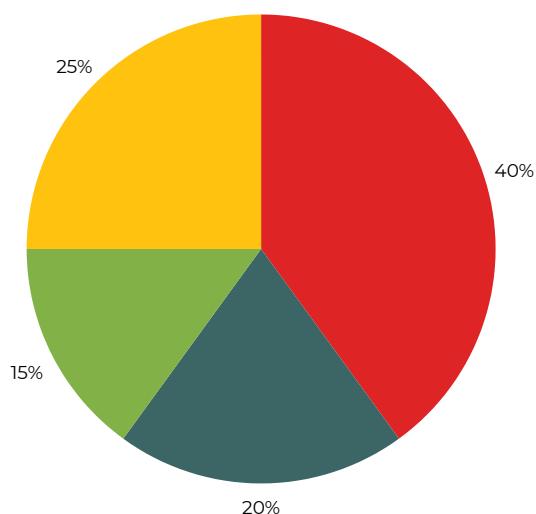
### IMPACT OF HOUSING INSTABILITY ON ATTENDANCE



#### Housing Instability

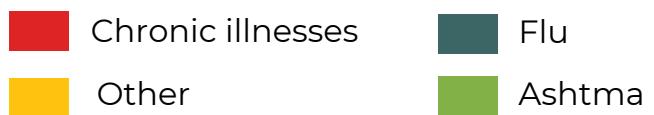
Families experiencing housing instability face disrupted routines, making it difficult to maintain consistent school attendance.

#### COMMON REASONS FOR ABSENCES DUE TO HEALTH



#### Health and safety

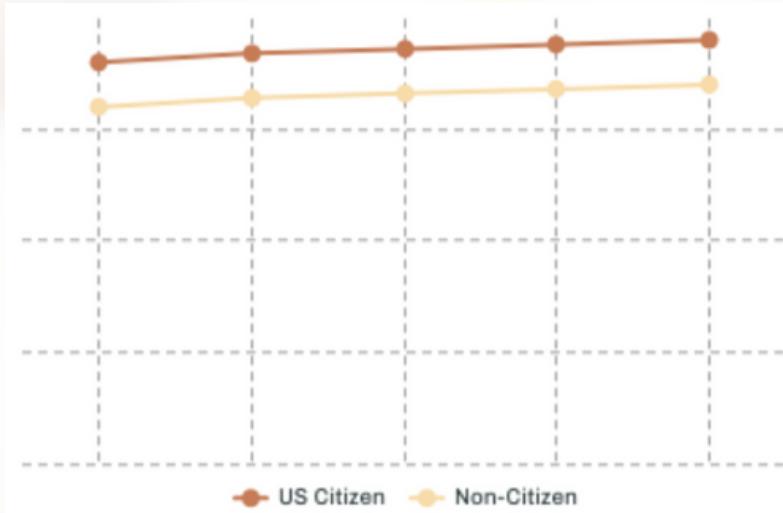
Chronic illnesses and safety concerns are major factors impacting attendance, particularly for children with special needs.



## Finding 2:

### Immigration and family needs

Fear of public systems and family responsibilities can keep immigrant children at home, impacting their education.

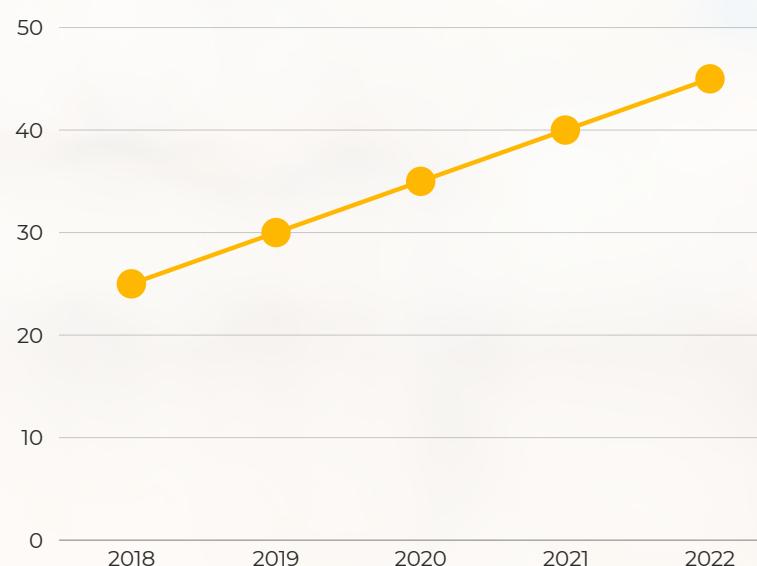


### Transportation barriers

Long commutes, unreliable public transportation, and traffic congestion create challenges for families getting to school.

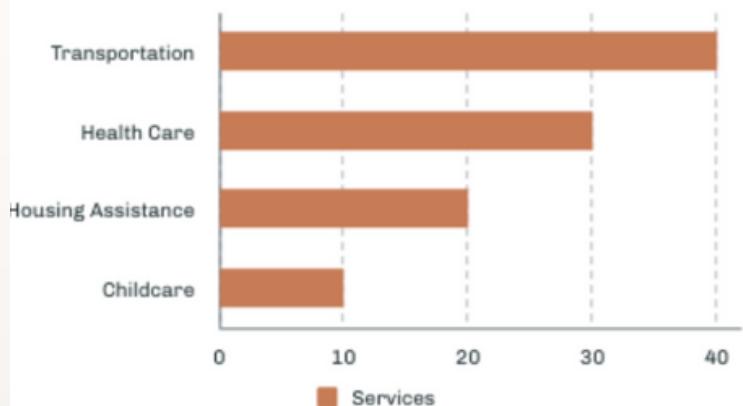
 Commute Time

### AVERAGE COMMUTE TIME



### Supporting families

Addressing these barriers requires understanding, support, and practical solutions to make school attendance easier for families.



## FINDING #2

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Across all focus groups and interviews, participants emphasized that **external, often uncontrollable, life circumstances remain the primary barriers to consistent school attendance**. Health issues, transportation challenges, and housing instability were cited repeatedly, not as occasional disruptions but as chronic, deeply embedded realities for many families. One parent shared, "My daughter has gotten sick with so much stuff... RSV and flu type B," while another added, "Some of my daughters have had to stay at home for 15 days at a time because I wasn't feeling well." These health concerns are especially acute in households with younger children and those managing conditions like severe asthma, where families may feel the school environment is unsafe or ill-equipped to handle their needs. A parent described, "My child has asthma, and different weather can trigger it. I don't feel that my child is safe here at the school when he's having those."

**Transportation is another major barrier that participants described as both logistical and systemic**, not merely a matter of punctuality. Parents reported being late or missing school entirely due to traffic congestion, lack of affordable transit options, or the need to navigate long distances while managing multiple children. One parent remarked, "I live in Hayward... sometimes we get late because of traffic," and another pointed out that "drop off is horrible... people double parking, it's bad." These challenges are further compounded when families lack access to consistent private transportation or when school infrastructure, like gate access or crossing guards, limits safe and efficient entry to campus. Participants suggested that **the absence of a formal transportation program or infrastructure investment signals a lack of institutional support** for families most affected by these challenges. According to Chang and Romero (2008), transportation is among the top three barriers to attendance, and they emphasize that **transportation solutions—like bus passes, school-funded carpools, or crossing guards—can significantly improve daily attendance among low-income students**.

In addition to health and transportation, **housing insecurity emerged as a quiet but persistent undercurrent shaping student attendance patterns**. Although few participants named it directly, those who did revealed its destabilizing impact on routines and school connection. A parent shared that "sometimes we have to do homeschooling to see which way we can support them," referring to temporary solutions while navigating unstable housing conditions. National research supports these insights. Fantuzzo et al. (2012) found that students experiencing housing insecurity are significantly more likely to miss school, struggle academically, and disengage from the school community altogether. The Lighthouse data echo this trend, as 4.5% of the student population is identified **as homeless—a number that, while statistically small, reflects substantial vulnerability** and underscores the need for targeted support.

## FINDING #2

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It is also important to note that many of these external barriers intersect with immigration status and broader socioeconomic stressors that shape family decision-making. One staff member referenced how recent political shifts have heightened immigration-related fears, indirectly influencing attendance, as some families choose to stay home rather than engage with public systems. Another student described missing school for “family stuff,” which was further explained as caregiving responsibilities or attending to family emergencies—demands that often fall on children in low-income, multigenerational households. Gottfried and Gee (2017) underscore that **chronic absenteeism must be understood within a bioecological framework**, where individual, family, and community-level stressors interact to shape educational outcomes. At Lighthouse, this framework helps illuminate how **structural disadvantage—not individual disinterest—is driving much of the absenteeism**.



These findings challenge narratives that attribute absenteeism primarily to student disengagement or parental neglect. Instead, they highlight how **chronic absenteeism is a reflection of chronic stress—of families doing their best to manage illness, transportation, safety, and stability**. Addressing these barriers requires structural investments—not just reminders or punishments. Participants recommended solutions such as a school-based transportation coordinator, increased crossing guard support, and more flexible communication options like Zoom check-ins for families unable to meet in person. **These recommendations reflect a community deeply aware of its needs—and eager for institutional response and partnership**. For Lighthouse to meaningfully reduce chronic absenteeism, it must center these realities in its attendance strategy, moving from individual-level interventions to systemic solutions that acknowledge and alleviate external burdens.

# Findings

## Finding 3: A Lack of Positive School Climate and Student Engagement Fuels Disconnection and Absenteeism



Students and families consistently highlighted that **school climate and culture directly influence a student's desire to attend school**. While logistical barriers like health and transportation play a significant role in absenteeism, so does the emotional and social atmosphere of the school. When asked about their motivation to attend, several students expressed a sense of disengagement, boredom, or discomfort on campus. One student shared bluntly, "I think, honestly, there's no school spirit. I mean, we lack a lot of that... the first thing you want to do is get out, including me, honestly." Others noted that while they enjoyed seeing their friends, there was little beyond that to motivate daily attendance. The absence of meaningful extracurricular activities, cultural celebrations, or student-led initiatives contributed to a prevailing feeling that school was "just a place to get through," rather than a space to grow, belong, or be inspired.

This sense of detachment is deeply concerning, as decades of research show that **positive school climate is a protective factor against chronic absenteeism**. According to Balfanz and Byrnes (2012), students who feel connected to their school are significantly more likely to attend regularly and less likely to engage in risk behaviors. When students believe that adults care about them, that their peers are supportive, and that their voices matter, attendance improves—even in the face of external stressors. Unfortunately, many students at Lighthouse expressed the opposite: that school felt impersonal and punitive. One student said, "When you didn't want to come in middle school... it's because they just give you the work and not a lot of explanation." Another added, "Recently, I've been coming to school most of the time... but before, I'd be missing two days every week... just being tired or drained." These responses reveal a **pattern of emotional fatigue, low instructional engagement, and a lack of relational support** that must be addressed systematically.

## FINDING #3

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Parents echoed these concerns and pointed to missed opportunities for engagement. One family member remarked, “Make the school a place where students want to come,” calling for more student-centered activities, community-building events, and opportunities for leadership. Students mentioned how their sense of purpose at school could be enhanced through recognition, creativity, and trust. In contrast, others described feeling surveilled or misunderstood by adults on campus. “They might be grilling them, like ‘Where were you?’” one student said of teachers’ reactions to absence. “Just be more understanding.” These quotes point to the **need for trauma-informed and relational approaches to student accountability**, where school staff view attendance not simply as compliance, but as a reflection of students’ emotional, social, and academic needs.

The role of **teacher retention and staff consistency** also emerged as a key factor shaping school climate. Several participants shared that frequent teacher turnover negatively affected student motivation and parental trust. One student noted, “Teacher retention has had a huge impact. Teachers being absent multiple times or having subs for long periods of time causes students to disengage and not want to be here.” This observation aligns with national findings by Gottfried (2014), who found that **low staff continuity disrupts student-teacher relationships—an essential component of school engagement and attendance**. When students cycle through substitute teachers or feel that adults are not invested in staying, they internalize that instability. It weakens their own sense of commitment to the school community and makes daily attendance feel less worthwhile.

Our research suggests that **school climate and student engagement are not peripheral concerns—they are central to any serious effort to reduce chronic absenteeism**. A transactional or punitive approach to attendance fails to recognize that students attend school consistently when they feel it is a place of value, safety, and connection. Students at Lighthouse are asking not for leniency, but for relevance and respect—for spaces that reflect their interests, validate their challenges, and celebrate their identities. Strengthening school climate through intentional investment in activities, staff-student relationships, restorative practices, and leadership transparency is essential. Without these efforts, attendance will continue to be treated as a symptom rather than a signal—and the underlying disconnection will remain unaddressed.



# Findings

## Finding 4: Incentives Work, but They Must Be Consistent, Age-Appropriate, and Well-Publicized,



Across all participant groups, there was strong agreement that **incentives are a powerful tool to improve school attendance—especially when they are meaningful, consistent, and developmentally appropriate**. Students across grade levels spoke enthusiastically about rewards such as pizza parties, popsicle days, and raffle-based prizes. One student shared, “What we’re doing... field trips, popcorn, ice cream, popsicles—like all those things, you know, snacks—students like so.” Others pointed to existing incentives like free dress days and classroom-level competitions as moments of celebration and motivation. At the same time, students were clear that the visibility and regularity of these programs mattered: “We have monthly incentives and perfect attendance bracelets... but I don’t think enough parents actually know that either,” one student noted. This suggests that even strong practices lose impact when not paired with clear, regular communication and reinforcement. The literature supports this interpretation. According to Balfanz and Byrnes (2012), **positive reinforcement strategies—particularly public recognition and group-based rewards—can dramatically improve attendance**, particularly when combined with relational support. In the Lighthouse data, students consistently associated attendance rewards with a sense of pride and community. One staff member described the excitement around a class-based attendance challenge: “If it’s over like 98%, they get free dress on Wednesdays... it’s a good incentive because we look forward to it.” Others referenced the “Everyday Counts Attendance Challenge,” which offers a \$500 stipend for students who maintain a 95% or higher attendance rate—highlighting that cash-based incentives are especially motivating for middle and high school students, many of whom also contribute to family income or value independence. As one student put it plainly, “Everybody is motivated by cash.”

## FINDING #4

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However, the data also revealed key limitations in how current incentive systems are implemented. **Inconsistency and lack of transparency are undermining trust and impact**, particularly among students who feel overlooked or confused by eligibility criteria. Several students described moments when they met attendance targets but did not receive the expected reward or did not even know about the opportunity. One said, “Do you think that if we had like pizza parties or a raffle... people would want to come? Yeah, but it needs to be fair.” This sense of unfairness also intersects with perceived inequities in how attendance is counted or communicated. Another student noted, “You can be excused, but they still count it against you... even when you’re really sick.” Without consistent messaging around how attendance is measured and how rewards are earned, **incentives risk reinforcing the very sense of exclusion they are designed to combat**.

Importantly, several staff emphasized the need to tailor incentives to different age groups and cultural contexts. For younger students, recognition and tangible rewards like stickers, bracelets, or certificates were effective. “They had the monthly incentive with bracelets and a certificate,” one staff member noted, referring to elementary students. But for older students, who are often navigating more complex social and emotional factors, food-based rewards, raffles, or even monetary incentives were considered more impactful. “Middle schoolers and high schoolers are motivated by food,” one participant said, “but if you take it even further, what we used to do is give cash.” These distinctions matter: **age-appropriate incentives not only improve attendance but can also support developmental milestones like responsibility, goal-setting, and self-efficacy** (Gottfried & Gee, 2017).

Finally, parents shared that **attendance incentives also serve as important bridges for family engagement**, especially when they are invited to participate in recognition ceremonies or are made aware of their child’s success. One staff said, “The parents that are very engaged... we invite them to come celebrate, and they’re proud.” However, others noted that parents who are less connected or unaware of existing incentives are unlikely to reinforce attendance messages at home. This points to the need for stronger communication loops and inclusive outreach practices. **If incentives are to be fully effective, they must be visible, equitable, and framed as part of a larger culture of belonging and success—not just rewards for compliance.**



# Findings

## Finding 5: Policies and Practices Are Perceived as Punitive and Unfair, Especially by Students Facing Structural Barriers



Many students at Lighthouse Community Public Schools expressed that **school attendance policies feel rigid, punitive, and unresponsive to the lived realities of their families**. In particular, students who experience structural challenges—such as transportation delays, chronic illness, or caregiver responsibilities—described feeling punished for circumstances beyond their control. “At one point they were doing something that if you were late more than, I think, eight times, you had to go to summer school,” one student recalled. Another explained, “I was out sick like, consecutive weeks because I had a respiratory illness... and they started marking it unexcused. My mom was like, why is it unexcused?” These experiences contribute to a broader perception that the school system doesn’t differentiate between willful absences and unavoidable ones, leaving students feeling discouraged and misunderstood.

— “

*I was out sick like, consecutive weeks because I had a respiratory illness... and they started marking it unexcused. My mom was like, why is it unexcused?*

” —

This perception is especially harmful in communities already facing socioeconomic and systemic disadvantages. Students and parents alike called for greater empathy and flexibility in how attendance is enforced. One student put it clearly: “Sometimes people aren’t able to come, and it’s not their fault... teachers might not understand and they might be grilling them.” Another added, “If I’m late and I explain why, but the teacher doesn’t listen, why ask me in the first place?”

These statements reflect a recurring sentiment that staff responses to absence or lateness often lack relational nuance, focusing more on compliance than context. National research reinforces this tension. According to Gottfried (2014), punitive attendance policies—such as mandatory summer school or excessive detention—can backfire, particularly for students already experiencing stress, illness, or trauma. Instead, restorative and trauma-informed approaches are more effective in promoting attendance through understanding and relationship-building.

## FINDING #5

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Parents also observed that **policies were often poorly communicated or inconsistently enforced**, further undermining trust. One caregiver shared, “They mark it unexcused after a few days, even when you call in,” while another said, “We weren’t told how many absences were allowed before it became a problem.” Several parents noted that the systems for tracking absences—like Aeries notifications—were not intuitive or clear, especially for Spanish-speaking or tech-limited families. As one participant said, “Parents don’t know the school depends on attendance. They don’t know that if attendance drops, it affects funding.” These findings point to a dangerous combination: **policy opacity, lack of accommodations, and missed opportunities for education about the broader implications of attendance.**

Students also voiced concern that **attendance violations were often treated the same regardless of circumstances**, reinforcing a sense of injustice. “There was another thing where if you’re late too many times, you had to go to summer school... that didn’t seem fair for students who aren’t the ones driving,” one student said. This kind of inflexibility clashes with the research consensus that effective attendance interventions must be **individualized, supportive, and responsive to the reasons behind absenteeism** (Attendance Works, 2024). In treating chronic absenteeism as a disciplinary issue rather than a symptom of deeper challenges, schools risk alienating the very students they aim to re-engage. Moreover, such policies may disproportionately impact students with disabilities, health conditions, or caregiving responsibilities—groups already vulnerable to educational inequities.

This finding illustrates that **students are not resistant to accountability—they are resistant to systems that feel unfair, impersonal, and disconnected from their daily challenges**. A more equitable approach would include differentiated responses to absence, clearer and more accessible communication about policies, and a culture of inquiry rather than assumption. As one student urged, “Come up with solutions. Don’t just point out my problems.” If Lighthouse intends to reduce absenteeism in meaningful and sustainable ways, **it must shift from a framework of punishment to one of partnership—where attendance policies reflect compassion, clarity, and context.**



# Findings

## Finding 6: Early Intervention and Staffing Capacity Are Critical, But Currently Insufficient



Participants overwhelmingly agreed that **early intervention is one of the most critical tools for reducing chronic absenteeism**, but Lighthouse Community Public Schools currently lacks the staffing capacity and systems to act early enough. Several staff members expressed a desire to reach families before absences accumulate, but the demands of high caseloads and limited personnel often delay outreach. One staff participant stated, “Sometimes we noticed that they have the meetings... not that soon... because we have like so many students. It’s hard to meet with parents.” Others described the first intervention happening after 10 or more absences, rather than at the two-to-three absence mark recommended by best practices. **This delay represents a missed opportunity to disrupt problematic attendance patterns before they become entrenched.**

Research strongly supports the need for early action. Balfanz and Byrnes (2012) emphasize that **intervening at the earliest signs of absenteeism—ideally after the second or third missed day—can significantly improve outcomes and prevent students from becoming chronically absent**. Parents and staff echoed this insight. One staff member said, “Just catching it earlier in the year... supporting those parents from day one. And also reminding them from day one that they need to be in school.” Yet, despite this shared understanding, participants repeatedly cited **insufficient staffing as a major barrier to timely intervention**. One staff member remarked, “Maybe just having one more person would be helpful,” while another emphasized, “There’s not enough hands. That’s really what it is.”

This gap in staffing not only delays intervention but also **dilutes the quality of engagement with families who need more relational, individualized support**. Participants noted that meaningful follow-up—whether through in-person meetings, home visits, or even Zoom calls—requires time that current staff simply don’t have.

## FINDING #6

“Weeks and weeks can go by... and sometimes it’s hard to meet with parents,” one team member reflected. These conditions mean that outreach efforts are often reduced to automated emails or calls, which participants have already identified as less effective. In contrast, schools with dedicated attendance staff or attendance case managers—as modeled in high-performing districts—report stronger outcomes because they can monitor patterns, maintain relationships, and intervene consistently (Chang & Romero, 2008).

### WHICH OUTREACH METHODS BUILD TRUST?

EFFECTIVENESS	OUTREACH METHOD
 <b>HIGH</b>	In-person meetings
 <b>MODERATE</b>	Zoom/video calls
 <b>HIGH</b>	Home visits
 <b>LOW</b>	Automated emails/calls

Parents also indicated that earlier contact would make them feel more supported, not just held accountable. “I would even start making calls to those families like a week before school starts,” one parent recommended, suggesting proactive rather than reactive outreach. This aligns with Attendance Works’ (2024) framework, which advocates for **“warm touch” strategies before the school year begins, especially for students with a history of chronic absenteeism.** Currently, however, this type of relationship-based prevention work is constrained by staffing shortages and competing responsibilities. Many attendance-related tasks fall to the operations or front office team, with one staff member acknowledging that “the office manager does a million things” and that attendance is “just one of them.”

**Lighthouse has a clear understanding of the importance of early intervention, but it does not yet have the staffing infrastructure to operationalize it effectively.** Staff are doing their best within a resource-constrained system, but without targeted investments in dedicated attendance staff or realignment of responsibilities, even the most well-intentioned strategies will continue to fall short. Participants are not asking for radical new policies—they are asking for **capacity, coordination, and time** to do what they already know works. If absenteeism is to be meaningfully reduced, **early intervention must be treated as a frontline prevention effort, not an afterthought activated once students are already chronically absent.**

# Findings

## Finding 7: The Role of Families Is Central, But Support Must Be Strengthened and More Inclusive



Both staff and families emphasized that **parents and caregivers play a foundational role in shaping student attendance patterns**, but they also acknowledged that not all families are equally equipped—or supported—to fulfill this role. Participants described a wide spectrum of parental involvement: some families are deeply engaged, monitoring attendance daily and celebrating perfect attendance milestones, while others are disconnected from school communication channels or unaware of attendance policies altogether. One parent explained, “Everything starts at home... but the student needs to understand how important it is to be here and study,” highlighting the mutual responsibility between school and family. Another added, “The parents that are very engaged... we invite them to come and celebrate. And they’re proud to.” These comments reflect the potential power of family-school partnerships—but also reveal that **engagement is often uneven, with some families highly informed and others left behind**.

This variation in engagement is often shaped by **systemic barriers, language access, and cultural differences**, rather than disinterest or negligence. Several participants noted that parents may not understand the rules around excused versus unexcused absences or the financial implications of poor attendance. One staff member shared, “Parents don’t know that the school depends on attendance. They don’t know that if attendance drops, it affects funding.” Others pointed out that communication platforms like Aeries or ParentSquare are underutilized by families who face technology access issues or who prefer personal outreach. As one participant stated, “Some parents don’t even check the emails. In our culture, we like to communicate one by one.” These findings support existing literature showing that **standardized, tech-based communication tools often fail to reach the families most in need of connection and support**, particularly English Learners, immigrant households, and families facing economic hardship (Gottfried & Gee, 2017; Attendance Works, 2024).

## FINDING #7

Participants also expressed a desire for **more proactive, welcoming, and inclusive strategies to support families with attendance challenges**. Several staff and parents recommended earlier outreach, ideally before the school year starts, to set expectations and offer support to families with known attendance risks. “I would start making calls to those families a week before school starts,” one participant suggested. Others described wanting more informal, relational touchpoints—like check-ins during drop-off or family events—to build trust and reinforce the importance of regular attendance. These strategies reflect the Attendance Works (2024) best practices framework, which prioritizes **relational engagement, family education, and culturally affirming outreach** as core components of sustainable attendance improvement. Yet, currently at Lighthouse, this type of ongoing, relational work is often limited by time, staff availability, and the absence of a dedicated attendance engagement team.



### When Communication Fails, Disengagement Deepens

Lack of bilingual or culturally responsive outreach

Parents confused or unaware of attendance rules

Impersonal policy enforcement (e.g., letters or emails)

Parents feel blamed or judged

Family-school trust weakens

Engagement decreases even more

Some families also articulated that school policies and leadership practices sometimes inadvertently alienate or penalize families who already feel vulnerable or unsupported. One participant shared, “She’s seen that [the policy confusion] has caused parents to either disenroll their students from Lighthouse and seek somewhere else... or if they’re still here, they’re disconnected.” In some cases, policies around tardiness or attendance letters—especially when delivered impersonally or without explanation—created confusion or defensiveness rather than cooperation. Others pointed out that parents want to be partners but need more clarity, access to information in their preferred language, and more consistent invitations to engage. Without this, the school’s reliance on families as frontline attendance influencers will remain aspirational rather than functional. As one participant put it, “Not all the parents use those tools... so it’s about awareness.”

Ultimately, this finding suggests that family engagement is not a “nice to have”—it is a central component of attendance success—but it must be approached with intentionality, equity, and humility. Families are already doing the best they can within difficult contexts. What they need from schools is not judgment, but partnership; not one-size-fits-all tools, but layered supports that account for cultural differences, resource gaps, and varying levels of trust in the school system. If Lighthouse seeks to meaningfully engage families in solving chronic absenteeism, it must invest in bilingual communication strategies, strengthen its outreach infrastructure, and cultivate a culture that views families not as subjects of compliance, but as partners in co-creating student success.

# Findings

## Finding 8: Students Need Empathy, Not Surveillance—Relationships Are the Foundation of Accountability



A recurring and powerful theme from student interviews was the urgent need for **empathetic, non-punitive responses to absence and lateness**. Many students reported that when they returned from an absence, they were met not with curiosity or care, but with interrogation, skepticism, or outright dismissal. One student reflected, “Be more aware of the barriers that people might have for not coming to school... sometimes it’s not their fault.” Another shared, “Teachers might be grilling them, like, ‘Where were you?’ So just be more understanding.” These responses reflect a broader frustration: **students don’t want to be excused from responsibility—they want to be seen in full context**. Many feel that their barriers are invisible to staff, and that the emotional cost of returning to school is compounded when adults respond with discipline rather than care.

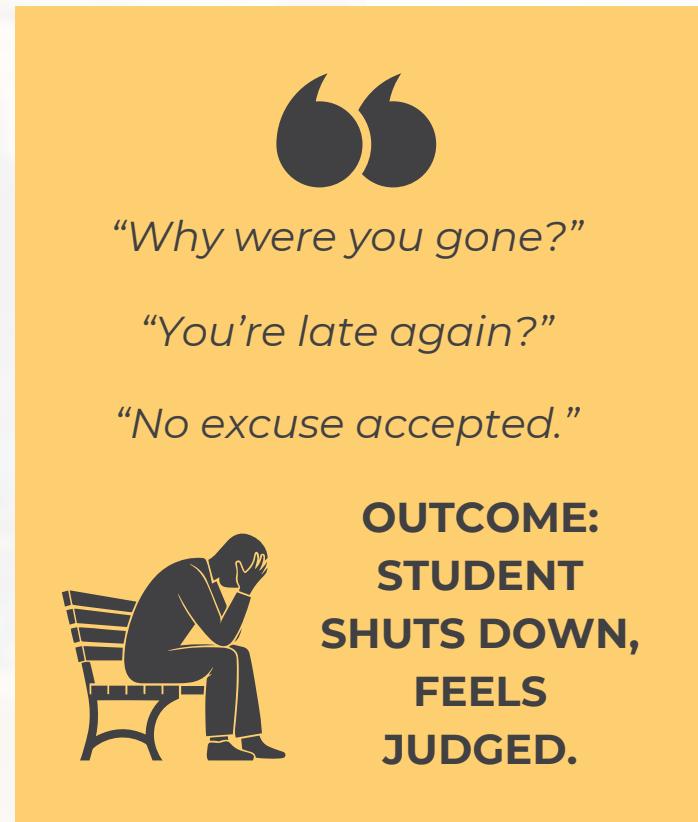
This theme is supported by research on school belonging and relational trust. According to Kearney (2008), **students experiencing attendance challenges often carry anxiety, shame, or trauma**, and their return to school is a pivotal moment for re-engagement. Schools that respond with connection, rather than surveillance, see better outcomes in attendance, behavior, and academic performance. Yet at Lighthouse, students frequently described interactions that felt impersonal or punitive. “Don’t ask me why I’m late if you’re going to say no anyway,” one student said, describing a moment when a teacher invalidated their explanation. Another added, “If you really want to know why I’m late, ask me outside the classroom so I don’t feel embarrassed in front of everyone.” **These statements signal that students are deeply attuned to tone, timing, and delivery—and that seemingly small interactions shape whether they feel welcome or judged.**

Participants repeatedly emphasized that **relationships—not rules—are the foundation for accountability**. Students noted that when adults took time to build trust, check in, or ask questions privately, they felt more motivated to attend. “I come up with solutions. Don’t just point out my problems,” one student said, expressing a desire for collaborative problem-solving rather than one-sided reprimands.

## FINDING #8

Others described how returning from an absence felt easier when their teachers acknowledged their presence and offered support, even informally. These perspectives echo the findings of Allensworth and Easton (2007), who found that **students are more likely to attend school regularly when they feel respected and connected to adults in the building.** At Lighthouse, however, the absence of sustained, trauma-informed training for staff may be contributing to interactions that unintentionally alienate the very students they are trying to support.

Importantly, students linked this lack of empathy to broader issues of school culture, including surveillance and mistrust. Several students noted how repeated experiences of being questioned, blamed, or ignored discouraged them from re-engaging after an absence. One said, “I think some of them could actually just not be going due to parents, or lack of attention... they just need to actually talk with the parents and see what’s going on.” Others emphasized that staff don’t always understand the complexity of students’ lives: “What’s one thing you wish teachers understood about students who miss school? That it’s not their fault. That they don’t have full control. Common sense stuff.” These are not simply calls for leniency—they are calls for compassion, dignity, and mutual respect.



This finding challenges traditional attendance interventions that rely heavily on compliance and consequence. Instead, it affirms that relational strategies—built on empathy, inquiry, and co-regulation—are more effective in building consistent school engagement. When students trust that adults will meet them with understanding, they are more likely to return and stay. If Lighthouse is to reduce chronic absenteeism in a sustainable and humane way, it must invest in relationship-centered practices: restorative conversations, check-ins after absences, private feedback, and staff training in trauma-informed care. Students have made it clear—what they need is not monitoring, but mentorship.

# Findings

## Finding 9: Confusion About Chronic Absenteeism Definitions Undermines Awareness and Action



One of the most consistent barriers to action across all stakeholder groups was a **widespread lack of understanding about how chronic absenteeism is defined, calculated, and communicated**. Both parents and students were often unaware that even excused absences count toward chronic absenteeism under state and district guidelines. As one staff member explained, “So part of chronic absenteeism is they consider every absence. So even if it’s excused, you’re still absent because you’re missing class.” A parent echoed this frustration, saying, “I called to excuse him, but it’s still showing up as absent. Why is that?” These examples illustrate that **many families assume that excused absences are functionally different from unexcused ones**, which leads to a false sense of security and delayed response to attendance issues.

This confusion has significant implications. California defines chronic absenteeism as missing 10% or more of the school year, for any reason. Yet participants revealed that this definition is rarely explained in detail, either at the beginning of the school year or during key touchpoints like parent-teacher conferences. One caregiver noted, “I didn’t know you could only miss two times a month before it’s a problem... I was vaguely aware of it, but not really.” This lack of awareness limits families’ ability to self-correct or seek support early on. Research confirms this pattern: **when families do not understand attendance metrics or how absences accumulate, they are less likely to take preventive action** (Attendance Works, 2024). In schools with high percentages of English Learners, this communication gap is often exacerbated by language access barriers and limited digital literacy.

The impact of this confusion extends beyond technical misunderstandings—it also shapes how families perceive fairness and trust in the system. Students reported that the school’s attendance expectations felt arbitrary or even punitive because they weren’t clearly explained. “They started marking it unexcused... even though I was really sick,” one student said. “Like, no one can judge how long someone’s going to be sick.” Another shared, “I think teachers need to actually give you more time to make up your work if they know you were absent for real reasons.”

## FINDING #9

These comments underscore how **inconsistent policy interpretation by staff—paired with a lack of clear, multilingual education for families—creates a sense of injustice and confusion.** Instead of building partnerships to support attendance, unclear definitions become another point of disconnection.

Participants also pointed to communication platforms as a source of the problem. While Aeries, ParentSquare, and automated messages are used to notify families of absences, they often fail to explain the broader implications of cumulative absences. “Voicemails say your child is absent, but they don’t tell you how serious it is,” one caregiver noted. Another parent shared that even when they receive daily notifications, “they don’t know that the absences stack up and turn into a problem.” **Without framing these notifications as part of a larger attendance story, the school loses the opportunity to shift behavior and build urgency.** Research from FutureEd (2023) reinforces that messaging is most effective when it is framed around consequences, solutions, and partnership—not just compliance.

### *How It Feels to Return—Depending on How Staff Respond*

RETURN EXPERIENCE	RESPONSE FROM STAFF	STUDENT FEELING
<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Absent due to family issue</li><li>Late due to transportation</li><li>Missed class due to anxiety</li><li>Returned after 3-day absence</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>“Why were you gone again?” (publicly)</li><li>“You’re always late—no excuses”</li><li>“Glad you’re back. Need anything?”</li><li>Teacher waves, checks in privately</li></ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>Shame, isolation</li><li>Embarrassed, misunderstood</li><li>Safe, supported</li><li>Seen, re-engaged</li></ul>

This finding highlights the need for a **comprehensive and accessible educational campaign around chronic absenteeism**, tailored to the needs of Lighthouse families. This should include plain-language explanations of how absenteeism is calculated, how it impacts school funding, and what resources are available for support. These messages must be delivered through multiple channels—paper, digital, in-person—and in all the languages spoken in the school community. **Increasing awareness is not just about fixing a technical gap—it is about shifting the culture from reactive to proactive, from confusion to clarity, and from disengagement to shared responsibility.** As one parent emphasized, “If I don’t know—and I’m a staff—then you know other people don’t know either.”

# Findings

## Finding 10: School Leadership Visibility and Transparency Deepen Community Trust



Participants across stakeholder groups stressed that **visible, engaged leadership strengthens trust and improves the overall culture of attendance support**. Several parents and staff members described a desire for school leaders to be more present—not just in terms of operational oversight, but in daily interactions, family meetings, and response to community concerns. One participant stated, “Having more investment from the leaders of the schools... having their presence so they can first-hand hear the concerns of the community and collaborate or work together.” Another added, “Yeah, more transparency for sure, from the school to the parents.” These insights reflect that **community members are not asking leaders to have all the answers—they are asking them to listen, show up, and act in partnership**.

This call for leadership visibility reflects a deeper need for relational trust, which Bryk and Schneider (2002) identify as a key predictor of school improvement. When families and staff feel that leaders are accessible, responsive, and willing to engage in shared problem-solving, they are more likely to stay connected to the school community—even when facing challenges like chronic absenteeism. However, when leadership is perceived as distant or opaque, **a vacuum of trust can emerge**, weakening engagement across all levels of the school. At Lighthouse, some participants indicated that policies and decisions related to attendance, school operations, or incentives were not consistently explained or applied, which contributed to confusion and, at times, resentment. One staff member pointed out that “there’s no actual attendance person,” and that “the office manager is doing a million things,” suggesting that leadership hasn’t yet allocated roles and responsibilities in a way that aligns with the scale of the attendance issue.

Parents also described how **leadership visibility—or the lack thereof—affects their sense of connection to the school**. “They don’t even know who the principal is,” one participant remarked, emphasizing that for some families, leadership feels abstract or invisible. Others mentioned wanting more opportunities for two-way dialogue with administrators—especially when it comes to understanding attendance policies, accessing resources, or voicing concerns about discipline and equity.

## FINDING #10

These findings align with the U.S. Department of Education's (2016) guidance on family engagement, which notes that **shared leadership and participatory structures lead to stronger student outcomes and more equitable school environments**. At Lighthouse, this suggests that leadership engagement should be seen not only as an administrative function, but as a relational strategy that directly impacts attendance and school climate.

Transparency also emerged as a critical lever. Participants were clear that they do not expect perfection, but they do expect honesty and clarity—particularly around issues that directly affect their children. One caregiver noted, “There are awesome parents who just don’t know... so making it more known would be helpful.” This statement, echoed in several interviews, suggests that **communication from leadership often lacks the frequency, transparency, and cultural resonance needed to build trust and activate family partnerships**. Whether it’s clarifying attendance policy, sharing school-wide goals, or explaining program availability, participants repeatedly asked for more open channels of communication and better coordination between leadership and frontline staff.

### TRUST-BUILDING PYRAMID FOR LEADERSHIP



Ultimately, this finding affirms that **trust in leadership is not built solely through formal channels—it is cultivated through presence, consistency, and shared accountability**. Parents and staff want to feel that their insights matter and that decisions are informed by those closest to the challenges. Leadership that is visible, responsive, and invested in listening creates the conditions for a healthier school culture—one where families feel seen, students feel valued, and attendance becomes a shared priority rather than a source of tension. If Lighthouse is to shift its attendance outcomes, **it must move from a leadership model focused on oversight to one grounded in collaboration, transparency, and relational trust**.

# Findings

## Finding 11: Parents Are Willing to Advocate for Resources, but Need Structured Opportunities to Lead



A powerful but often overlooked insight from this study is that **many parents are not only open to engagement—they are eager to lead and advocate on behalf of the broader school community**. Participants described taking initiative in creative and impactful ways, from coordinating food pickups for other families to suggesting structural improvements like transportation programs and crossing guards. One parent shared, “We created a parent group to pick up food from another school and bring it here... families really needed it.” Another suggested, “Have someone who works at the school coordinate transportation—like an actual program, not just asking parents to figure it out.” These comments reveal that **parents already possess valuable insight and organizing capacity**, and that with institutional support, they could play a more central role in addressing chronic absenteeism and school-level barriers.

Despite this readiness, parents reported that **opportunities to lead are rare, informal, and sometimes inaccessible**. Some families described feeling disconnected from leadership structures or not knowing how to elevate their ideas. “They’re just bringing their students to school,” one participant said, “but they’re pretty much disconnected from what’s happening.” Others expressed that when feedback is offered, it’s not always acknowledged or acted upon. This disconnect reflects a missed opportunity: national research shows that **when parents are positioned as co-leaders rather than passive recipients of information, school climate, attendance, and academic outcomes improve significantly** (U.S. Department of Education, 2016; Bryk et al., 2010). At Lighthouse, the groundwork for this kind of engagement exists—but it needs structure, intentionality, and cultural alignment to become sustainable.

Importantly, participants did not ask for tokenistic involvement. They asked for **meaningful, consistent, and empowered roles in shaping school decisions and practices**. Several parents voiced ideas for how to make engagement more inclusive, such as offering meetings at different times of day, providing interpretation, and giving parents real decision-making power in programs like attendance incentives or after-school activities.

## FINDING #11

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Additionally, several parents shared that **structural improvements they've advocated for—such as traffic safety or free morning care—have had positive impacts, but were only possible when leadership listened and followed through**. One caregiver noted that a crossing guard was finally implemented after persistent advocacy, improving both safety and timely arrival. Others expressed pride when their children received attendance awards, suggesting that recognition of both student and parent efforts can reinforce engagement. These examples illustrate that when parents are invited to co-create solutions, not only does attendance improve, but broader school trust is deepened. As Chang and Romero (2008) and Attendance Works (2024) have emphasized, sustainable attendance solutions must involve families as problem-solvers—not just as compliance enforcers.



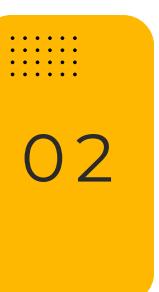
In closing, this finding highlights that **the Lighthouse parent community holds untapped leadership potential**, and that activating this potential requires more than occasional outreach—it requires infrastructure. Schools that cultivate parent leadership through advisory councils, co-designed programs, and shared governance frameworks report higher attendance, stronger family-school relationships, and more equitable outcomes. If Lighthouse aims to transform its attendance landscape, it must go beyond engagement to empowerment—**recognizing parents as strategic partners in both diagnosing challenges and designing solutions**.

# Recommendations

To significantly increase daily attendance and effectively combat chronic absenteeism, the following recommendations have been identified as crucial strategies. Although we must keep in mind the aforementioned limitations of this project, implementing these measures can be the foundation of a more all-encompassing and impactful approach to ensure consistent attendance and improve student outcomes.

## 1. STRENGTHEN COMMUNICATION INFRASTRUCTURE WITH CULTURAL RESPONSIVENESS AND PERSONALIZATION

- **01**  
**Audit and redesign communication systems**

to ensure that messaging is clear, timely, and culturally responsive. Move beyond mass emails and automated texts by incorporating personalized phone calls, in-person check-ins, and messaging through trusted school staff.
- **02**  
**Provide multilingual communications**

across all platforms (letters, calls, apps), including clear explanations of attendance policies, the definition of chronic absenteeism, and its impact on academic progress and school funding
- **03**  
**Invest in community navigators**

or bilingual family liaisons who can build trust and provide personalized outreach, especially for families less engaged with digital systems.

## 2. ADDRESS STRUCTURAL BARRIERS THROUGH DIRECT SUPPORT AND SYSTEMIC SOLUTIONS



### Establish a transportation equity plan

01

that explores carpool coordination, subsidized public transit passes, and partnerships for school-based transportation programs. Prioritize families who report regular lateness or absence due to transit challenges.



### Implement a family needs assessment

02

at enrollment to proactively identify barriers such as health conditions, housing instability, or caregiving responsibilities that may impact attendance.



### Design flexible support systems

03

such as remote attendance check-ins or short-term home-based learning options—for students facing temporary but legitimate barriers (e.g., chronic illness, hospitalization, displacement).



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### 3. INVEST IN SCHOOL CLIMATE AND STUDENT BELONGING

- 01

**Co-develop student-led initiatives**

that foster school pride, build peer connection, and improve the emotional environment. Ideas may include spirit weeks, advisory groups, or youth leadership councils focused on climate and culture.
- 02

**Embed social-emotional learning (SEL)**

trauma-informed practices, and restorative justice into daily routines and discipline procedures. Provide training for all staff on culturally affirming classroom practices that center empathy and student voice.
- 03

**Track student perceptions of safety and belonging**

through short, anonymous surveys and use the data to inform continuous improvement.



## 4. REDESIGN INCENTIVE PROGRAMS WITH EQUITY AND CONSISTENCY



### Create a tiered incentive structure

01

that addresses different age groups and motivations—e.g., tangible rewards for younger students, public recognition and gift cards for older students.



### Ensure incentives are publicized, consistently implemented, and equitably accessible

02

including through flyers, school events, and direct communication with families.



### Incorporate family participation

03

into incentive programs, such as inviting caregivers to recognition ceremonies or allowing them to nominate their children for improvement-based awards.



## 5. RE-EXAMINE ATTENDANCE POLICIES FOR FAIRNESS AND FLEXIBILITY

- 01

**Revise attendance policies**

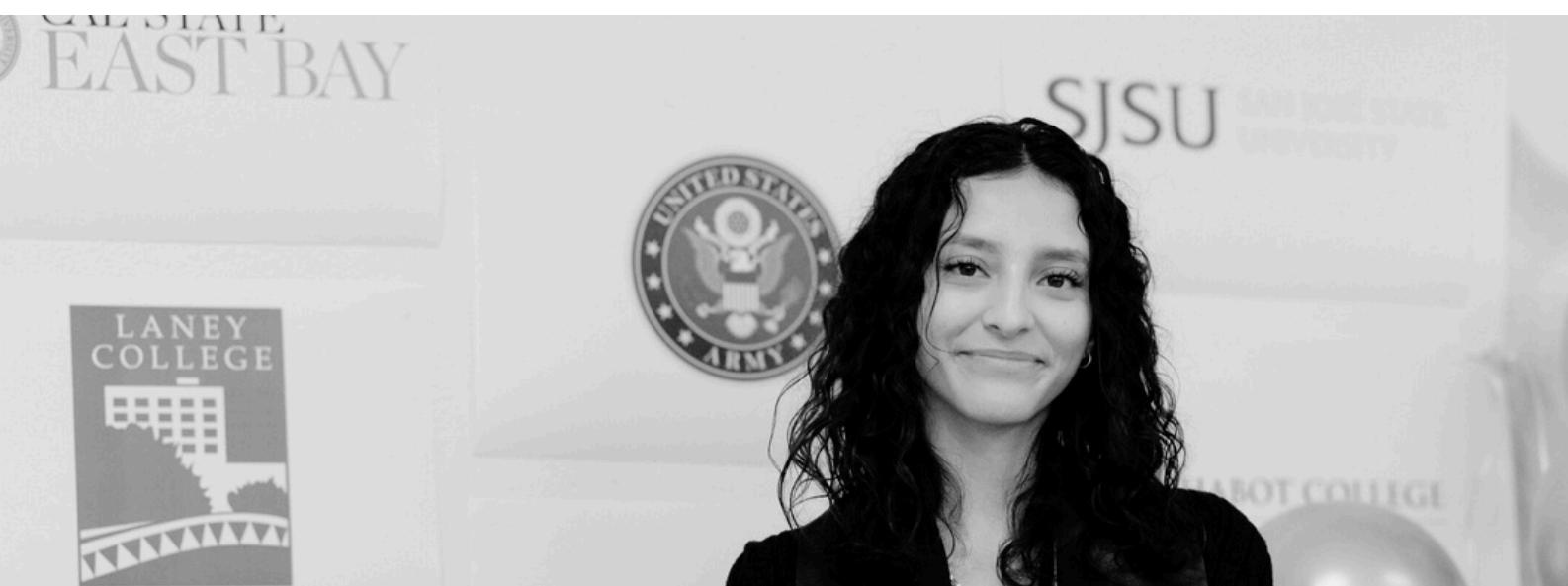
to include clear guidance on excused absences, make-up work, and consequences for lateness. Ensure that policies distinguish between avoidable and structural absences and that staff apply them consistently.
- 02

**Implement a policy equity review process**

involving students and families to examine how current attendance policies impact different groups.
- 03

**Train staff on implicit bias and policy interpretation**

particularly in the enforcement of punitive attendance rules (e.g., detentions, forced summer school for lateness).



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## 6. BUILD CAPACITY FOR EARLY INTERVENTION THROUGH STAFFING AND WORKFLOW REDESIGN

- 01

**Hire or designate a dedicated attendance Intervention specialist**

at each site who is responsible for reviewing attendance data, contacting families, and coordinating tiered supports.
- 02

**Implement an early-warning system**

that flags students with two or more absences and triggers personalized outreach and support.
- 03

**Streamline internal workflows using attendance “playbooks,”**

shared Slack channels, or Airtable dashboards that allow staff to coordinate communication and track intervention outcomes in real-time.



## 7. EXPAND AND FORMALIZE FAMILY ENGAGEMENT STRUCTURES

- 01

**Launch structured family engagement initiatives**

such as parent advisory councils, family leadership fellowships, or ambassador programs that give families a voice in school planning and policy.
- 02

**Host regular multilingual town halls or parent cafés**

focused on topics like attendance, student health, mental wellness, and school policies.
- 03

**Conduct listening sessions or empathy interviews with families of chronically absent students**

to understand their lived experiences and co-create solutions.



## 8. CULTIVATE A CULTURE OF EMPATHY AND ACCOUNTABILITY AMONG STAFF

01

**Provide ongoing professional development in trauma-informed care, relational discipline, and motivational interviewing**

to help staff respond supportively to students with attendance challenges.

02

**Adopt a re-engagement protocol**

that ensures returning students are greeted positively and offered opportunities to make up missed work without public shaming.

03

**Create systems for staff to privately follow up with students after an absence**

to understand and respond to underlying issues, rather than treating absence as solely a behavioral concern



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## 9. LAUNCH A SCHOOL-WIDE AWARENESS CAMPAIGN ABOUT CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM

- 01

**Create multilingual, family-friendly materials**

explaining what chronic absenteeism is, how it's calculated, why it matters, and how families can get help.
- 02

**Incorporate attendance awareness into back-to-school events, report cards, and classroom discussions**

ensuring that the messaging is proactive rather than punitive.
- 03

**Use student art, storytelling, or media projects**

to elevate awareness about the impact of attendance and encourage peer accountability.



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## 10. INCREASE LEADERSHIP VISIBILITY AND BUILD TRUST THROUGH TRANSPARENT ENGAGEMENT

- 01

**Ensure that site leaders regularly attend family meetings**

drop-off/pick-up times, and community events, not just formal administrative functions.
- 02

**Create “Ask the Principal” forums or anonymous feedback systems**

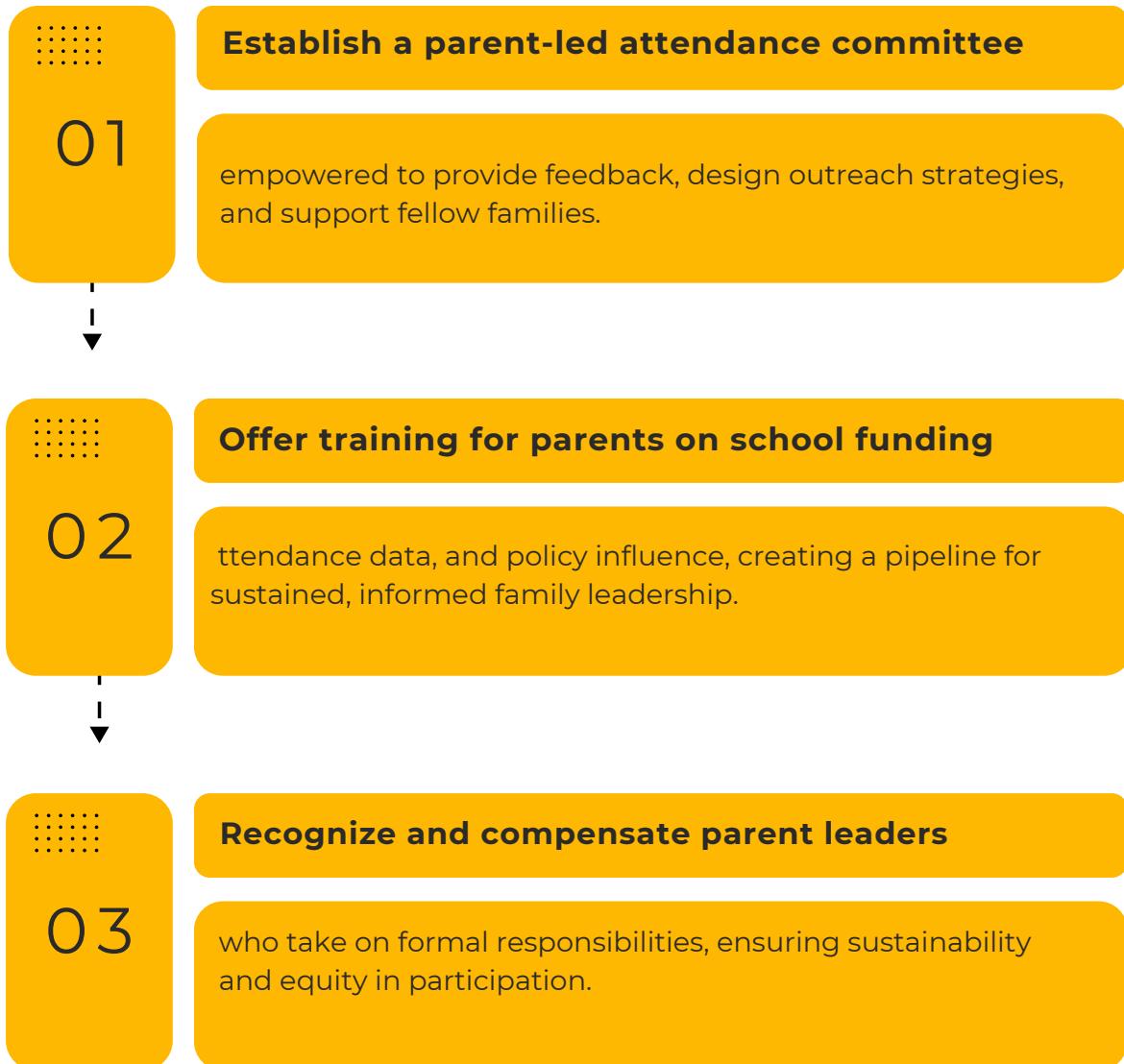
where families and students can share ideas and concerns.
- 03

**Clearly communicate decisions related to attendance interventions**

incentives, or policy changes, including who to contact for support or questions.



## 11. FORMALIZE AND SUPPORT PARENT ADVOCACY AND LEADERSHIP



Addressing chronic absenteeism at Lighthouse Community Public Schools will require more than improved attendance monitoring—it will require **an intentional, equity-centered reimaging of relationships, roles, and resources**. These recommendations reflect the lived experiences of the school community and align with national best practices in student engagement, trauma-informed systems, and school transformation. By embedding these strategies into both policy and practice, Lighthouse can shift from reacting to absenteeism to cultivating a school culture that students and families choose to show up for—every day.

# Comprehensive Attendance Improvement Framework



## CAPACITY BUILDING AND EARLY INTERVENTION

Expansion of Recommendation 6

**Rationale:** Attendance support is not sustainable when overburdened office managers or administrators must carry the entire load. Infrastructure matters.



### Attendance Fellows Program

Recruit and train trusted community members or retired educators as part-time “Attendance Fellows.” They support phone banking, wellness checks, and home visits, with supervision from the attendance team.



### Unified Attendance Dashboard

Leverage systems like Wizearly that flag red-alert absences, notes interventions, and tracks follow-up—all accessible by site-based teams.



### Daily Attendance Huddles

At each school, establish a 15-minute daily check-in between front office staff, attendance leads, and administrators to triage new absenteeism concerns and assign follow-up.

# Comprehensive Attendance Improvement Framework



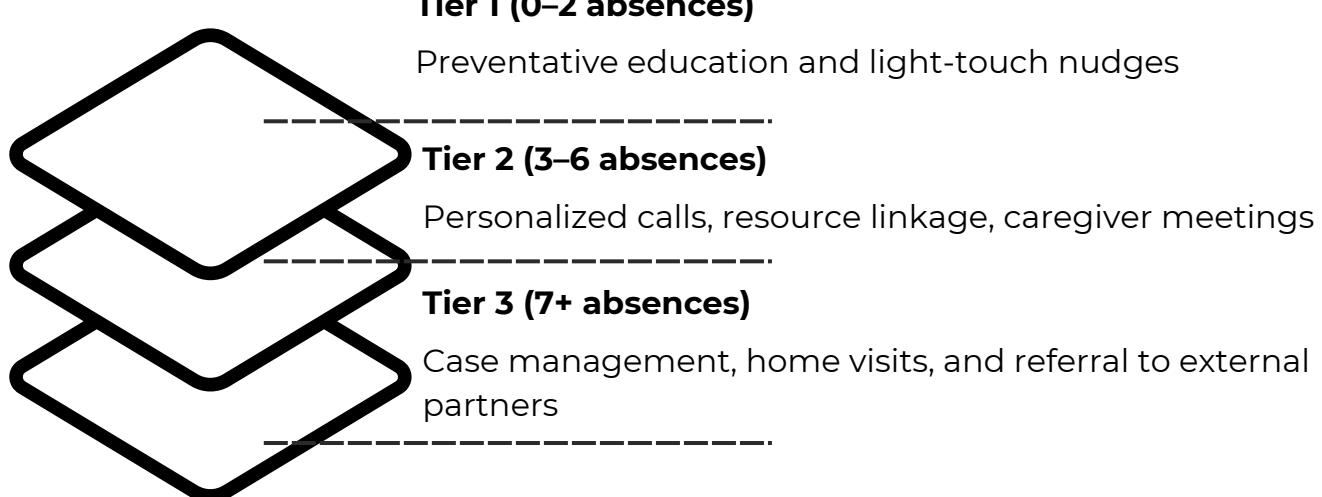
## BUILD A TIERED FAMILY ENGAGEMENT AND SUPPORT SYSTEM

Expansion of Recommendations 1, 2 & 7: Communication, Structural Barriers, Family Engagement

**Rationale:** Families are foundational to student attendance, but the support must be differentiated and culturally attuned. A one-size-fits-all approach will reinforce inequities

### **TIERED ATTENDANCE RESPONSE PROTOCOL (TARP):**

*Develop a decision-making matrix for progressively intensive supports*



# EXPANDED STRATEGIES



## DIGITAL FAMILY WELCOME KITS:

*Multilingual onboarding including:*



- Definitions of chronic absenteeism
- School-day logistics (drop-off/pick-up, health protocols)
- Family rights and responsibilities
- Videos or audio translations to increase accessibility

## ATTENDANCE NAVIGATORS

Assign bilingual liaisons to 10–15 Tier 2/3 families per site. Train them in motivational interviewing and systems navigation.

## DISTRICT ATTENDANCE LEADERSHIP TEAM (DALT)

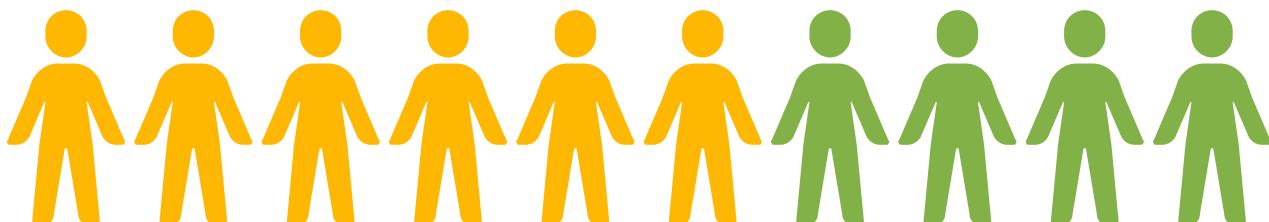
Multi-stakeholder task force is analyzing attendance data monthly and aligning strategies.

## QUARTERLY ATTENDANCE PROGRESS BRIEFINGS

Publish disaggregated data reports, share successful practices, and communicate outcomes.

## ATTENDANCE VISION STATEMENT:

Endorse a public, equity-centered mission visibly posted in schools to anchor attendance in belonging, not compliance.



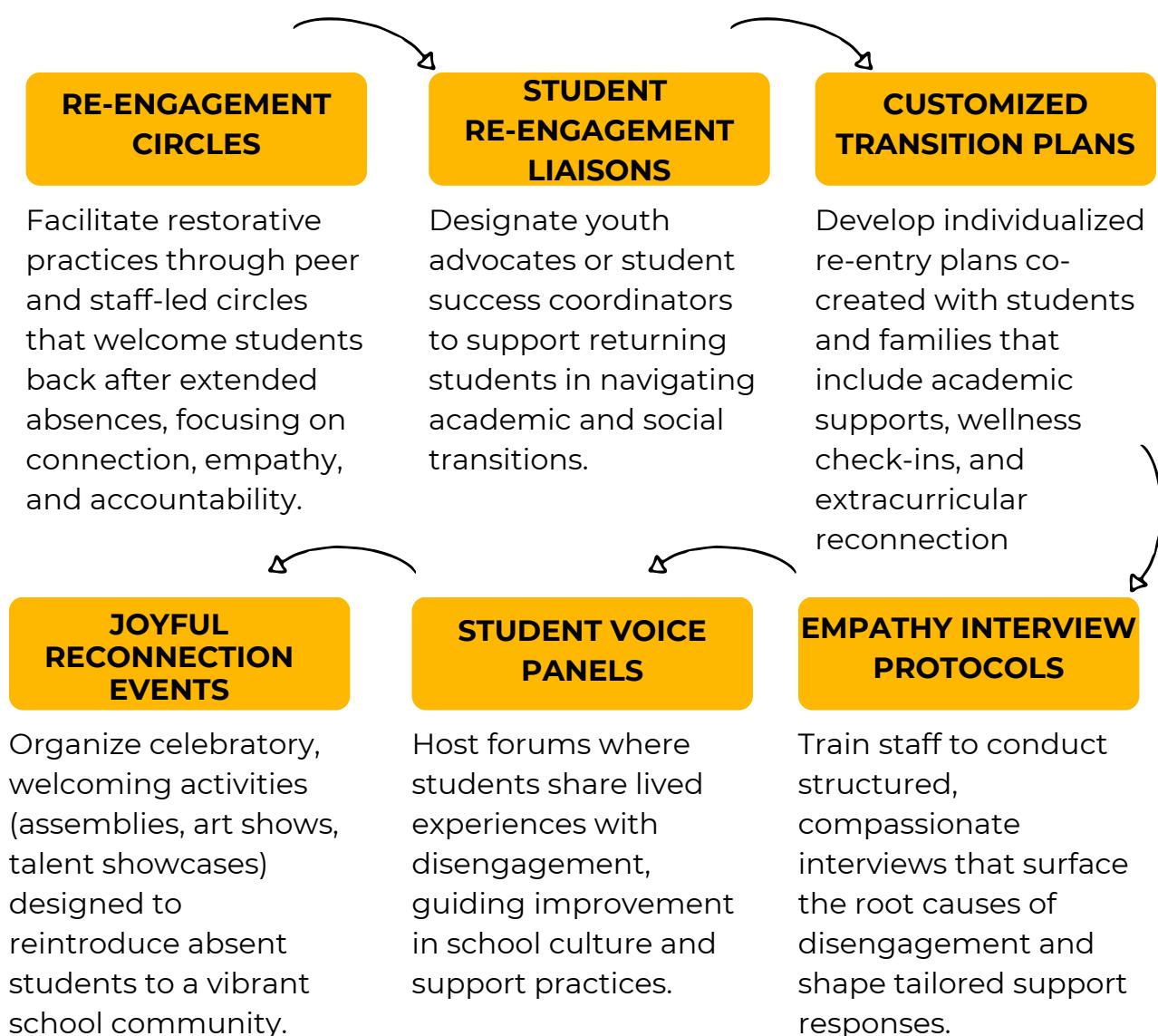
# REFRAME ATTENDANCE CAMPAIGNS WITH A HEALTH AND JUSTICE LENS



Expansion of Recommendations 2 & 9: Awareness and Structural Barriers

**Rationale:** Families need to see that attendance policies are designed to protect, not punish their children. A shift in framing can reduce defensiveness and build collaboration.

## EXPANDED STRATEGIES:



# REFRAME ATTENDANCE CAMPAIGNS WITH A HEALTH AND JUSTICE LENS



Expansion of Recommendations 2 & 9: Awareness and Structural Barriers

**Rationale:** Families need to see that attendance policies are designed to protect, not punish their children. A shift in framing can reduce defensiveness and build collaboration.

## EXPANDED STRATEGIES:

### “ATTENDANCE IS CARE” CAMPAIGN

*Launch a year-long narrative campaign centered around:*

Family videos about  
“Why We Show Up”

Posters in multiple  
languages  
promoting wellness,  
opportunity, and  
resilience

Student voices via  
digital storytelling,  
podcasts, social  
media takeovers

### SCHOOL-BASED HEALTH ACTION TEAMS:

*Formalize partnerships among school nurses, counselors, and attendance staff for trauma-informed case responses.*

### PUBLIC HEALTH-INFORMED ABSENCE POLICY REVISIONS:

*Include accommodations for mental health days, chronic illness, and trauma in absence policies.*



# INSTITUTIONALIZE PARENT LEADERSHIP AND SHARED GOVERNANCE



Expansion of Recommendation 11: Parent Advocacy and Leadership

**Rationale:** Parents are not just stakeholders—they are systems thinkers and grassroots organizers. We must invest in their leadership, not just their compliance

## EXPANDED STRATEGIES:

### PARENT ATTENDANCE LEADERSHIP INSTITUTE (PALI)

*Train 15–20 parents annually in:*



### PARTICIPATORY BUDGETING FOR INCENTIVES:

*Have PALI participants co-design attendance incentives with community voting.*

### PARENT CO-FACILITATED ATTENDANCE FORUMS:

*Conduct regular workshops or town halls co-led by parents to boost trust and participation*

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# ACCOUNTABILITY THROUGH DATA TRANSPARENCY AND LEARNING CULTURE



Cross-cutting Reinforcement Strategy

**Rationale:** What gets measured gets improved—if the right people have access and context. Data should be democratized and used as a collective improvement tool.

## EXPANDED STRATEGIES:

### SCHOOL-LEVEL DATA EQUITY REPORTS:

*Create transparent, family-friendly attendance data reports shared quarterly to build community trust and awareness.*

### STUDENT-LED DATA DIALOGUES:

*Facilitate student-led presentations to school leadership using attendance dashboards to explain trends and root causes from their perspective.*

### PROFESSIONAL LEARNING COMMUNITIES (PLCS) FOR ATTENDANCE:

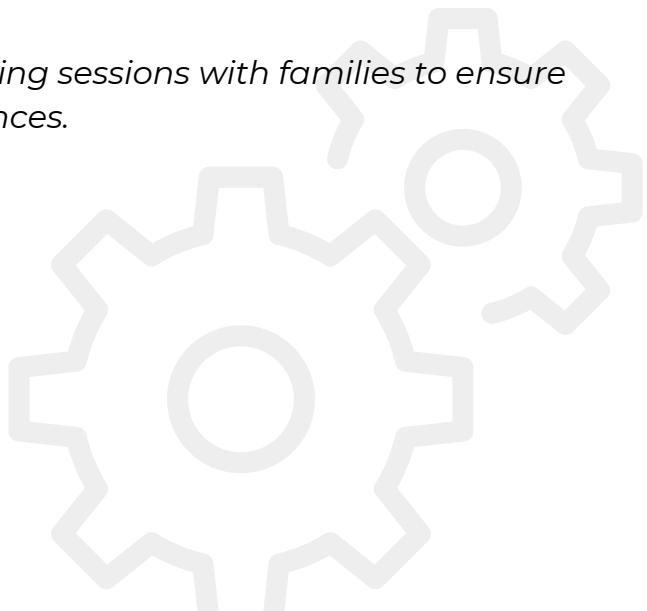
*Establish school-based PLCs that meet monthly to analyze trends, reflect on practices, and develop site-specific action plans.*

### ATTENDANCE DATA TRAINING FOR ALL STAFF:

*Provide ongoing PD for teachers and support staff on how to access, interpret, and respond to real-time attendance data.*

### FEEDBACK LOOPS WITH FAMILIES

*Conduct routine feedback surveys and listening sessions with families to ensure data systems are responsive to lived experiences.*



# Next Steps

The work outlined in this report represents the completion of Phase 1: Discovery and Light Implementation Planning of a multi-year initiative (2024–2027) to improve attendance across Lighthouse Community Public Schools. With critical insights now gathered from data analysis, stakeholder engagement, and early planning, the next stage of this initiative will move toward actionable implementation and long-term systems change.

## PHASE 2: LIGHT IMPLEMENTATION (2025–2026 SCHOOL YEAR)

The upcoming school year will focus on translating discovery insights into pilot efforts that build awareness, strengthen school community engagement, and test promising practices. Key next steps include:

### ATTENDANCE 101: PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT WORKSHOPS



Prior to the start of the school year, ONGB will deliver Attendance 101 professional development sessions to equip staff with a shared understanding of attendance policies, systemic barriers, and strategies to create a culture of belonging that supports daily attendance.

### ACHIEVEMENT INFLUENCER PROGRAM



A student leadership program will be launched at the high school level to activate student voice and peer-led engagement around attendance. These student leaders will serve as attendance ambassadors, helping to promote awareness campaigns and encourage consistent school participation. A complementary parent group may also be established to broaden community involvement and reinforce attendance messaging at home.

### PILOT INITIATIVES AND PARENT ENGAGEMENT

Pilot attendance initiatives will be co-designed with select school sites to spark enthusiasm, increase visibility, and foster stronger connections between schools and families. These initiatives will emphasize belonging and engagement, and will include targeted outreach using tools such as ParentSquare, particularly during Attendance Awareness Month.

# Next Steps

## LONG-TERM STRATEGY AND IMPLEMENTATION (2025–2027)

Building on the foundation laid in Phases 1 and 2, the final phase of the initiative will focus on institutionalizing sustainable attendance practices and shifting school culture at both the district and site levels.

### COMPREHENSIVE ATTENDANCE PLAN

Insights from the discovery and pilot phases will be used to co-create a district-wide attendance plan. This plan will address root causes of chronic absenteeism, align resources and policies, and outline concrete strategies for fostering inclusive and responsive school environments.

### ONGOING PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT AND SUPPORT

To ensure sustainability, ONGB will continue to provide coaching, consultation, and targeted professional development to district leaders, school administrators, and instructional staff. This ongoing capacity-building will support LCPS in embedding effective attendance practices into everyday systems and routines.

Together, these next steps mark a transition from learning to action, positioning LCPS to create long-term, system-wide improvements in student attendance and engagement.

# APPENDICES

## LCPS Chronically Absent Student Data Summary

### Ethnicity Breakdown

- Latino: 372 students → 84.16%
- African American: 44 students → 9.95%
- Two or More Races: 17 students → 3.85%
- White: 6 students → 1.36%
- Asian / Pacific Islander: 3 students → 0.68%

Insight: A large majority (over 4 in 5) of chronically absent students are Latino.

### Grade Level Distribution

- Most represented grades: 8th Grade: 48 students (10.84%)
  - 7th Grade: 39 students (8.80%)
  - 4th Grade: 38 students (8.58%)
  - 11th Grade: 36 students (8.13%)
  - 10th & 1st Grade: 30 each (6.77%)

Insight: Chronic absenteeism is most concentrated in middle school grades (7th-8th) but spans across K-12.

### Gender

- Female: 247 → 56.01%
- Male: 194 → 43.99%

Insight: Slightly more chronically absent students identify as female.

### English Learner (EL) Status

- EL (English Learner): 169 → 38.15%
- EO (English Only): 167 → 37.70%
- RFEP (Reclassified Fluent English Proficient): 87 → 19.64%
- IFEP (Initially Fluent English Proficient): 13 → 2.93%
- TBD: 7 → 1.58%

Insight: Nearly 4 in 10 students are current English learners.

### Special Education Status (SPED)

- No Program: 355 → 80.14%
- IEP: 86 → 19.41%
- Unknown: 2 → 0.45%

Insight: Nearly 1 in 5 students are identified with an IEP.

### Foster Care Status

- Not in Foster Care: 438 → 98.87%
- In Foster Care: 5 → 1.13%

### Homeless Status

- Not Homeless: 423 → 95.49%
- Homeless: 20 → 4.51%

Insight: While a small portion, students experiencing homelessness are represented in the data and merit targeted support.

### Migrant Status

- Not Migrant: 443 → 100%

### Is SPED (Binary Flag)

- Not in Special Education: 355 → 80.14%
- In Special Education: 88 → 19.86%

Insight: This reaffirms the earlier SPED breakdown — ~1 in 5 are SPED-identified.

### Attendance Rates

- **Most common attendance rates:**
  - 89.5%: 41 students
  - 88.7%: 40 students
  - 88%: 35 students
  - 87.2%: 28 students
  - 85.7%: 32 students

Insight: A majority of students cluster around the **mid-to-high 80s in attendance**, falling just below the 90% “regular attendance” threshold — qualifying them as chronically absent.

# APPENDICES

## LCPS Chronically Absent Student Data Summary

### Suspensions

- No suspensions: 433 → 97.74%
- 1-6 suspensions: 10 students

Insight: Most students are not facing disciplinary suspensions.

### Office Discipline Referrals

- 0 referrals: 335 students (75.62%)
- 1-5 referrals: 92 students (20.77%)
- 6+ referrals: 16 students (3.61%)

Insight: The vast majority of students have 0-1 office discipline referrals, suggesting absenteeism is not driven by extreme behavior concerns for most.

**CLICK HERE TO SEE THE  
LCPS BOARD POLICY**

ATTENDANCE POLICY (LCPS WEBSITE)





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# Thank You

