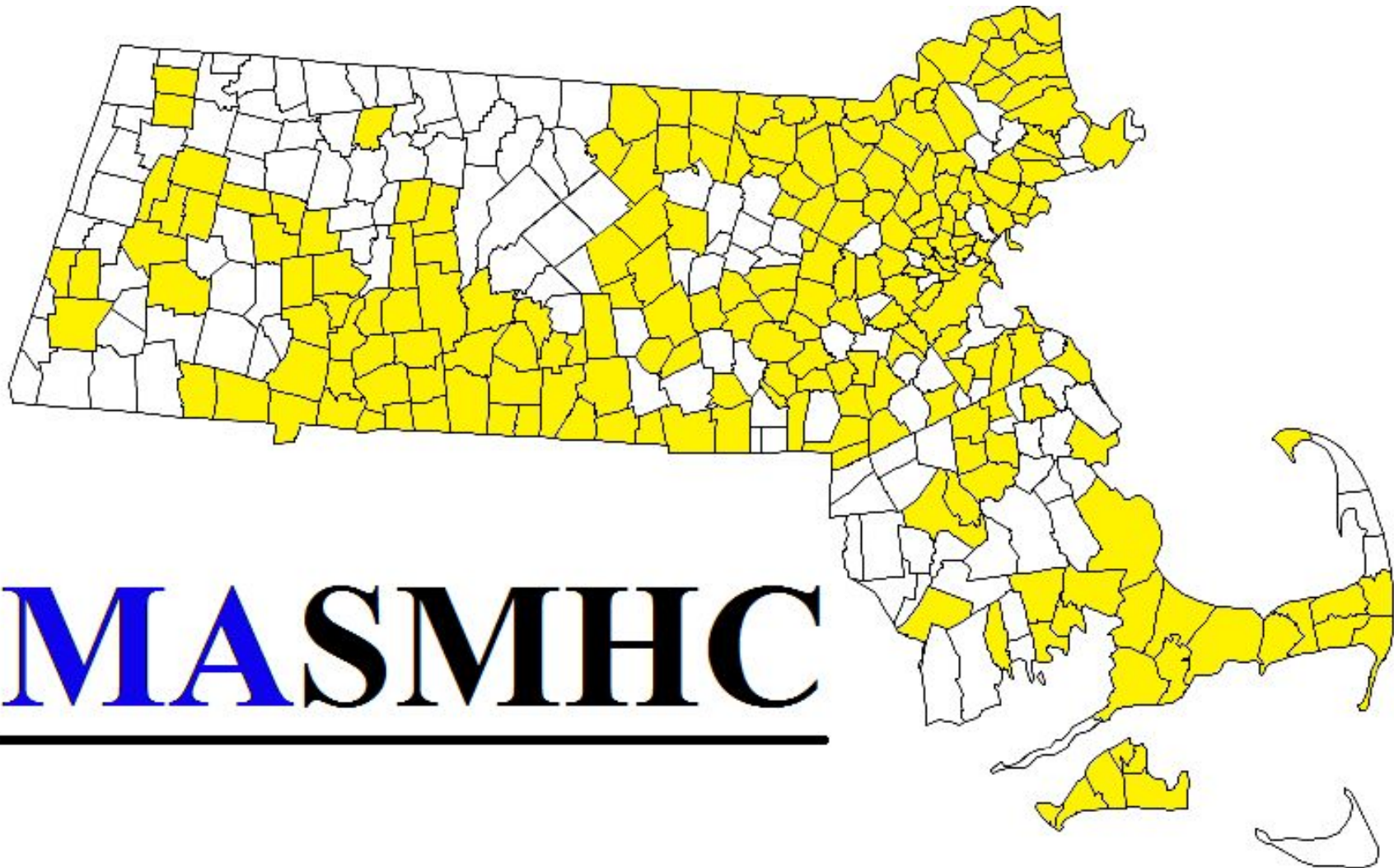



**MASMHHC**





# Understanding the Complexity of Chronic Absenteeism

John Crocker  
Director of School Mental Health & Behavioral Services  
Founder & Director, MASMHC



# Opening and Introductions

- My background and how I fit into this space.
- What sector of the field do you represent?
- What are the impacts that you are seeing related to chronic absenteeism?



# Discussion: What Needs to Go Well to Be Present?

- What had to go well for you this morning to make it to this meeting?
- What could have gotten in the way of you attending today?
- Did you navigate any barriers to getting here today? Why were you able to overcome those barriers?
- How would you feel about attending today's meeting if the topic wasn't interesting to you? If the environment was unwelcoming? If you did not feel like you belonged? If you had some significant unmet needs?



# Chronic Absenteeism: A National Focus

- “Across the country, the rate of chronic absenteeism reached about 31% in 2021-2022 because of COVID-19.” -Biden-Harris Administration (2024)
- The Biden-Harris Administration announced its “Improving Student Achievement Agenda for 2024 in January, which includes a significant focus on chronic absenteeism.
- “The Department [DOE] is asking educators, researchers, policymakers, community-based organizations, and others to share evidence-based strategies and resources by submitting them to the Department’s Best Practices Clearinghouse.”

# Healey-Driscoll Administration Launches 'Your Presence Is Powerful' Campaign to Raise Awareness of Importance of School Attendance

**“We know that districts, families, and students have been working hard to improve attendance and we’re pleased to see these numbers moving in the right direction,” Johnston said. “But by no means are we through, by no means are we done.”**

**-Boston Globe**



**State education secretary takes to airwaves with a message: make school attendance 'a priority'**



# The Headline: Pandemic, Progress, and Persistence

As of June 2024, 19.7% of our students were chronically absent, compared to our pre-pandemic rate of 13%.

Thank you! Your persistence helped bring chronic absenteeism rates down from our pandemic level high of 27.7%.

At the same time, high rates are persisting longer in Massachusetts and nationally, impacting all student groups.

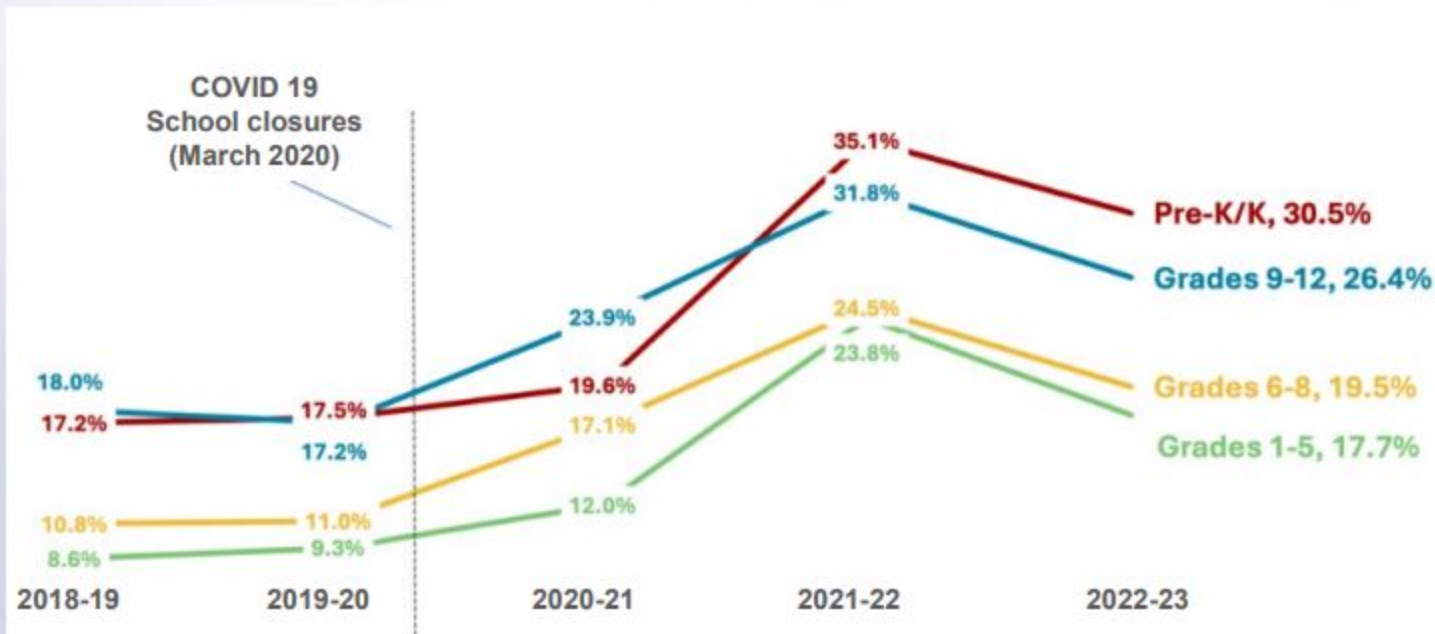


As part of our [Educational Vision](#), DESE is committed to providing every Massachusetts student a joyful, healthy, and supportive learning environment where they feel known, connected and valued.

Reducing chronic absenteeism (missing at least 10% of school days for which a student is enrolled that year) is a key metric for success.

# Massachusetts Trends by Grade Span

Chronic absenteeism is highest in PreK/K and high school



## Additional Insights

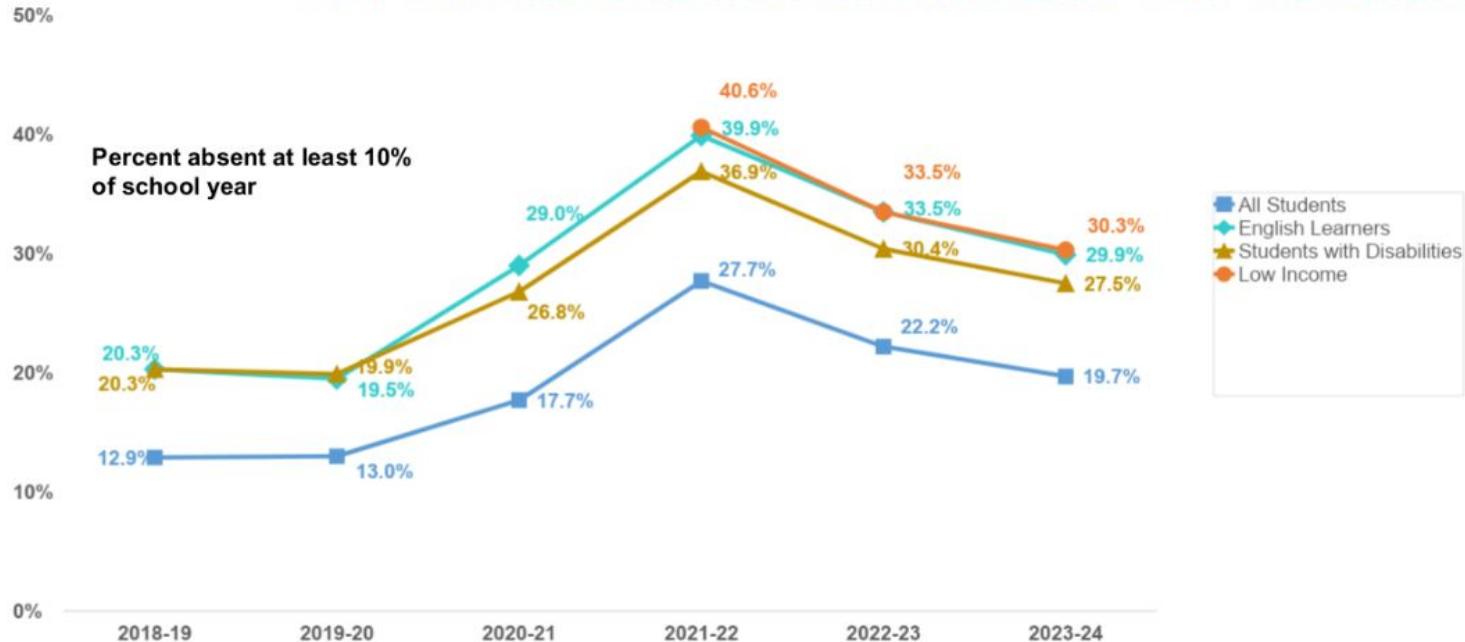
Chronically absent kindergarteners have lower attendance and lower achievement in future grades.

More than half of students who drop out were chronically absent 3 years prior.

Students in classrooms with high chronic absence feel a **spillover effect**; for example, lower test scores.



## Chronic absenteeism rates are higher for English learners, low-income students, and students with disabilities



### Additional Insights

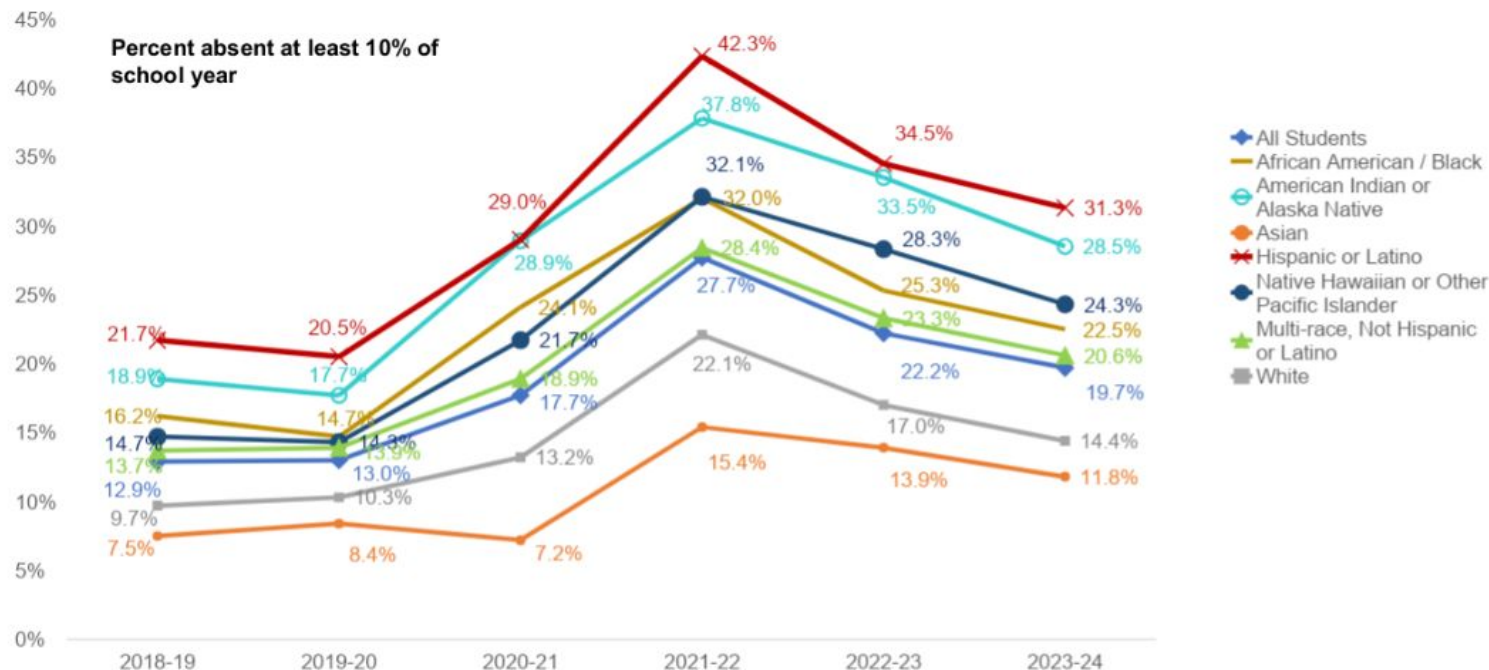
National research shows the negative effects of school absences are larger for low-performing, low-income, and English learner students.

Almost half (47%) of high school English Learners missed 10% of school in 2022-2023.

# Massachusetts Trends by Race/Ethnicity

## Chronic absenteeism varies by race/ethnicity

Percent absent at least 10% of school year



### Additional Insights

Chronic absence can cause educators to view students more negatively, fueling a negative cycle.

2 out of 5 Hispanic/Latino high school students miss 10% of school or more

More MA districts impacted:

- March 2024: 338 districts and 1486 schools (10%+)
- 2018-19: 198 districts and 913 schools (10%+)

# The “Why” of Chronic Absenteeism

- Conceptualize chronic absenteeism as a function of the confluence of a variety of risk factors.
- Focusing on any one cause may be shortsighted or fail to account for the litany of different reasons why a student and family may be struggling to attend school.
- Consider the problem of chronic absenteeism as a public health issue requiring intervention across sectors.

Why?

# An Integrated School-Community Public Health Approach to Chronic Absenteeism

- No one entity, agency, or organization has control over the multitude of contributing factors that lead to and reinforce chronic absenteeism.
- Collaboration between schools, community agencies, and state agencies is requisite to develop a comprehensive response.
- If we treat chronic absenteeism as a problem restricted to the school context, we are missing the bigger picture.



# The Complexity of Chronic Absenteeism

- Social Influencers of Health and Education (SIHE)
- Environmental factors
- Safe and supportive environment
- Cultural considerations
- Transportation
- Sense of belonging
- Bullying and harassment
- Sleep hygiene
- Medical needs
- Language needs
- Technology barriers
- Misconceptions about education and absenteeism
- Mental health concerns
- School start time
- ***What else?***





# Social Influencers of Health and Education (SIHE)



# Social Influencers of Health and Education (SIHE)

- How does lack of access to food, clothing, housing, medical care, etc. contribute to chronic absenteeism?
- How does screening for SIHE fit into this discussion?
- Can schools serve as the only organizations to disrupt SIHEs?



# Factors Underlying Chronic Absenteeism

National research cites familiar root causes and risk factors, along with new or intensified post-pandemic variables

Health and  
Mental Health



Transportation  
Challenges



Absence and Attendance  
Misconceptions



Economic and Housing  
Instability



School Aversion /  
Student Experience



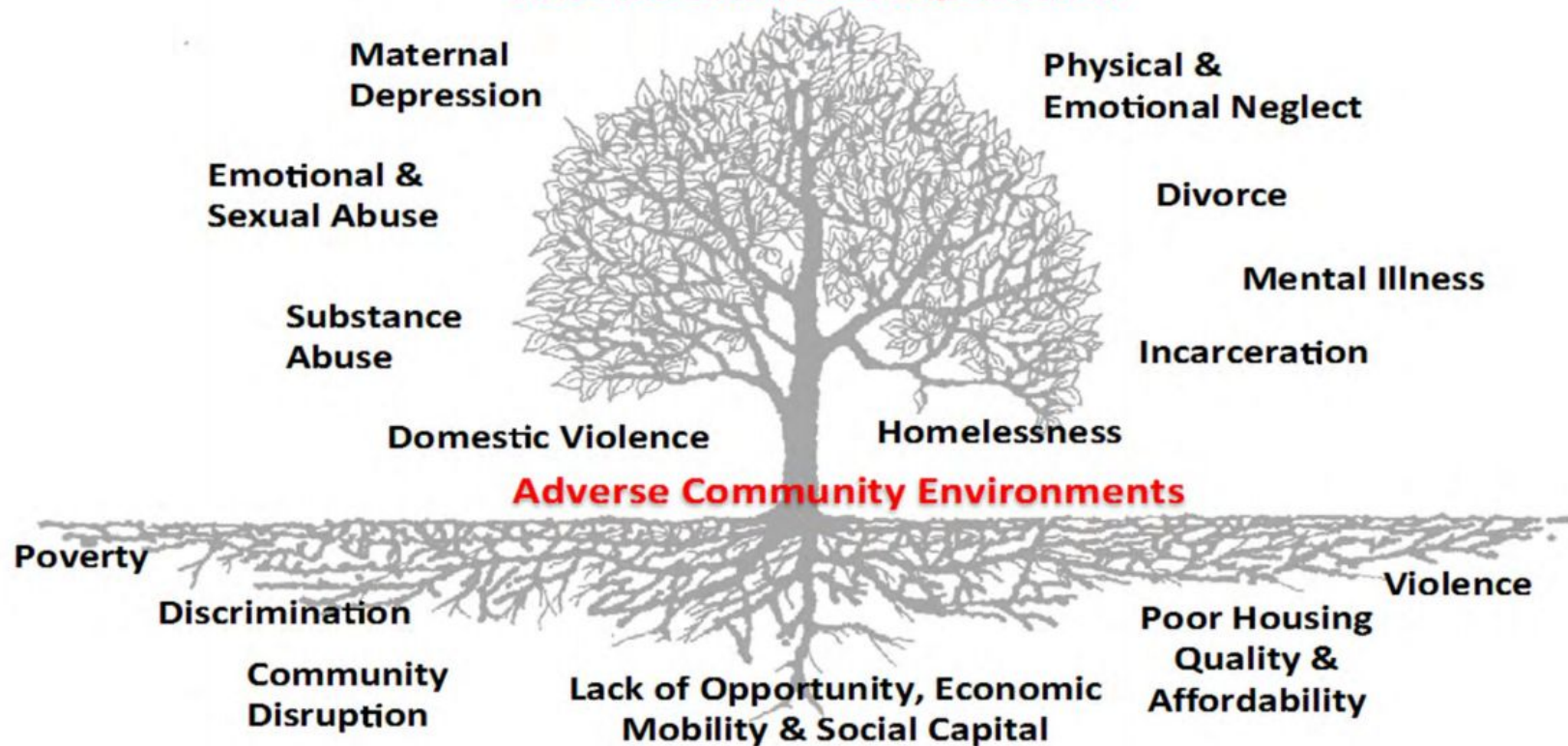
## Post-Pandemic Variables

- More widespread demographically
- Rise in youth mental health challenges
- Shifting caregiver/parent and student attitudes (lower threshold for missing school, more protective, etc.)
- Economic stressors



## The Pair of ACEs

### Adverse Childhood Experiences





# Categorizing the Reason for Chronic Absenteeism to Inform Intervention

## Barriers

- Chronic and acute illness
- Family responsibilities or home situation
- Trauma
- Poor transportation
- Housing and food insecurity
- Inequitable access to needed services
- System involvement
- Lack of predictable schedules for learning
- Lack of access to tech
- Community violence

## Aversion

- Struggling academically and/or behaviorally
- Unwelcoming school climate
- Social and peer challenges
- Anxiety
- Biased disciplinary and suspension practices
- Undiagnosed disability and/or disability accommodations
- Caregivers had negative educational experiences

## Disengagement

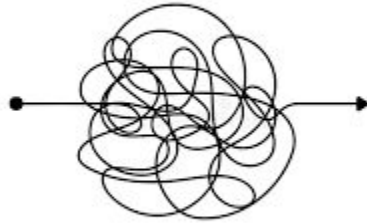
- Lack of challenging, culturally responsive instruction
- Bored
- No meaningful relationships to adults in the school (especially given staff shortages)
- Lack of enrichment opportunities
- Lack of academic and behavioral support
- Failure to earn credits
- Need to work conflicts with being in high school

## Misconceptions

- Absences are only a problem if they are unexcused
- Missing 2 days per month doesn't affect learning
- Lose track and underestimate TOTAL absences
- Assume students must stay home for any symptom of illness
- Attendance only matters in the older grades
- Suspensions don't count as absence



# Braided Solutions for a Complex Problem



# What is U.S. DOE Recommending?

“The adoption of ***early warning intervention systems*** and effective use of data can help identify and address root causes of student absenteeism. ***Low-cost informational interventions***, like sending supportive letters and texts to parents, can also help reduce absenteeism.”

-U.S. DOE



# Recommendations from U.S. DOE

- **Developing and implementing a communication plan** that reinforces the importance of routine, in-person attendance at school every day, and increases the frequency and quality of interactions between schools and families. This can include sending parents information about their children's attendance patterns through texts, letters, and calls, approaches that have been proven to affordably and substantially reduce absenteeism.
- **Strengthening relationships with families, including through home visiting.** An [evaluation](#) of home visiting indicated that students whose families received at least one visit from a teacher were 21 percent less likely to be chronically absent. Schools can provide dedicated staff, including paid parent liaisons, to support and strengthen relationships.
- **Using a multi-tiered system of support and intervention, including an early warning intervention system** to identify students for increased support based on attendance, grades, behavior, and assignment completion. A comprehensive system of support and intervention can help ensure students do not slip through the cracks, and this system can facilitate targeted efforts to improve engagement and reduce absenteeism.
- **Creating a positive school climate.** Students who feel welcome, supported, and engaged at school are [more likely](#) to have better attendance. An essential part of the long-term solution to increasing attendance is sustaining a positive learning environment for all students.
- **Adopting [Continuity of Instruction Plans](#)** to keep students on track when absent (e.g., due to unforeseen school closures or health).

# Strategies DESE Can Support



## Data Systems, Practices, and Root Cause Analysis

Clear ownership of attendance data with equity focused analysis and learning, including specific student group trends and insights from families, students, and staff



## Proactive Family Partnership and Outreach

Early, positive, authentic, supportive, and culturally responsive communication and collaboration with families and students; reframing attendance in the context of engagement and understanding families' expectations and experiences.



## Holistic Student Support System

Assessing student's holistic strengths and needs with an equity lens; addressing attendance barriers; and actively tracking/adjusting universal supports and interventions.



## School Culture and Belonging

Ensuring students feel seen, safe, and supported in school, and on the way to and from school. Valuing all students' voices, identities and backgrounds; centering the needs of historically underserved groups and communities. Connecting every student to supportive adults and activities during and after school.



## Engaging Instruction

Ensuring students are engaged in high quality, culturally and linguistically sustaining learning experiences that are real-world, relevant, and interactive, with individualized support to enable students to meet grade level standards and beyond.

# Comprehensive School Mental Health System (CSMHS)





# Comprehensive School Mental Health System (CSMHS)

“Comprehensive School Mental Health System (CSMHS ) is defined as school-district-community-family partnerships that provide a continuum of evidence-based mental health services to support students, families and the school community.”

- Provides a full array of tiered mental health services
- Includes a variety of collaborative partnerships
- Uses evidence-based services and supports



# In a school with a comprehensive mental health system:

**All students** experience high-quality basic education about mental health and self care, and regular screening for mental health challenges.

Students with **emerging or moderate mental health challenges** receive appropriate support (individually and/or in group settings).

**Students with acute mental health challenges** receive intensive, customized supports.

All education and supports are provided by **well-trained professional staff** with workable caseload sizes, and with access to focused and supportive clinical supervision.

All staff are trained in, and consistently utilize, **common frameworks and language** related to mental health and wellbeing.

**Effective systems** are in place for referrals, assignment to interventions, progress monitoring, and exiting students from supports and interventions.



# Major Features of Methuen's CSMHS



- Comprehensive staffing model
  - All staff are responsible for providing care and support across all domains of need and tiers of support
  - Specialization is honored and leveraged through project assignments
- Comprehensive Student Support Team (CSST)
- Universal screening in grades K-12
- Evidence-based therapeutic care across all tiers of support
  - Tier I - Cognitive theory based SEL curriculum; mental health literacy activities; PBIS; Collaborative Problem Solving; trauma-informed classroom practices
  - Tier II - CBT groups; short term individual therapy; skills based groups
  - Tier III - SPED programmatic services; bryt Program; long term individual therapy; wraparound services with community based partners
- Community partners
  - Beth Israel Lahey Health Behavioral Services (Local CBHC); Cartwheel; Care Solace; Nan Project; NAMI

# Home Visits



"Parent Teacher Home Visits (PTHV) is a strategy for engaging educators and families as a team to support student achievement. The PTHV model developed from an understanding that family engagement is critical to student success."

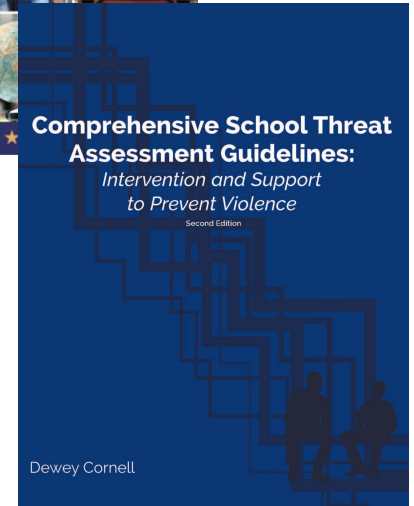
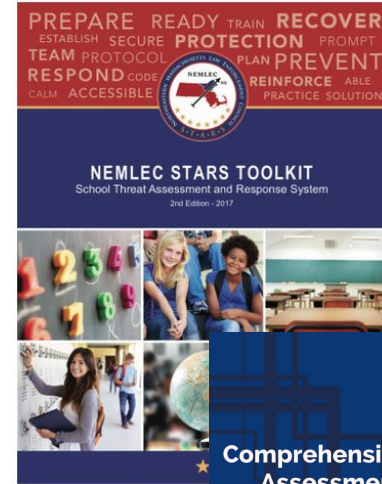
-Parent Teacher Home Visits, 2018

An evaluation of home visiting indicated that students whose families received at least one visit from a teacher were 21 percent less likely to be chronically absent.

-U.S. DOE

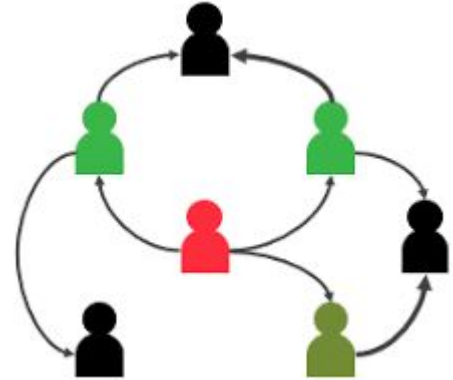
# Fostering Safety

- Bullying and harassment policies and procedures.
- [Critical incident management procedures.](#)
- Consideration of threat assessment protocols, but not as a replacement for prevention oriented systems of identification and support.
- Follow up services for both parties.
- Fostering mental health literacy to develop help seeking behavior and skills to identify one's own needs and the needs of others proactively.



# Fostering Belonging and Connectedness

- Curriculum that reflects the culture and values of the communities we serve.
- Programming and services that are culturally and linguistically matched.
- Elevating diverse perspectives and developing opportunities for student voice from historically marginalized populations.
- Consider relationship mapping exercises and fostering a community of “trusted adults.”
- Culturally affirming communication.





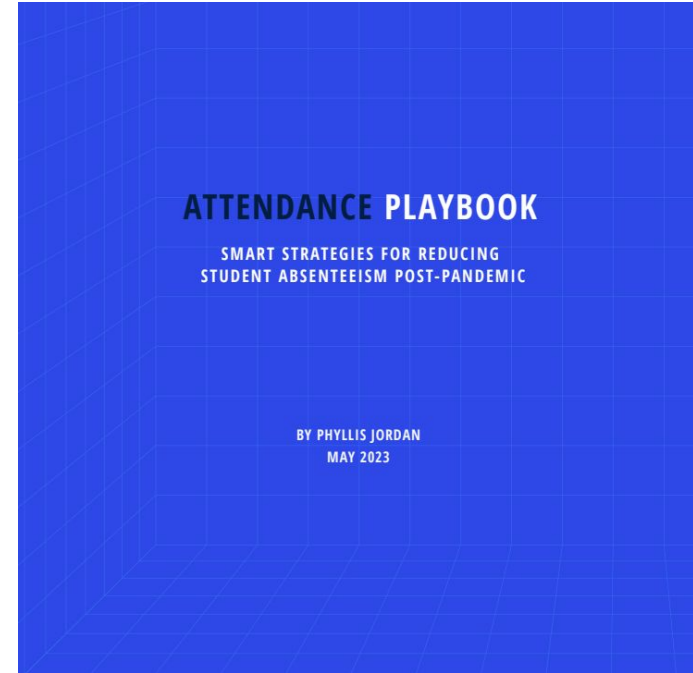
# Additional Systemic Changes and Policy Considerations

- School start time
- International travel policy
- Addressing physical plant concerns
- Transportation
- School-based Health Center (SBHC)
- On site access to social services and SIHE supports



# Attendance Playbook

- Offers suggestions across tiers of support to foster attendance.
- Strategies are cross-cutting and address the most common reasons for chronic absenteeism: aversion, barriers, disengagement, misconceptions.
- Some strategies can be implemented immediately, some require significant investment.



# What does it take to invest in these strategies?

- Stakeholder buy in.
- Investment in systems and staffing despite limited funding and accountability to do so.
- Expertise in the development of clinical and social services programming, multi-tiered systems of support, organization and use of specialized staff, and development of data systems.
- Adoption of a culture of support (safe and supportive schools; trauma-informed care; fostering belonging).
- Acknowledgement of the importance of an integrated school-community public health approach to chronic absenteeism.
- Investing in families and community.



# Health Equity and Chronic Absenteeism

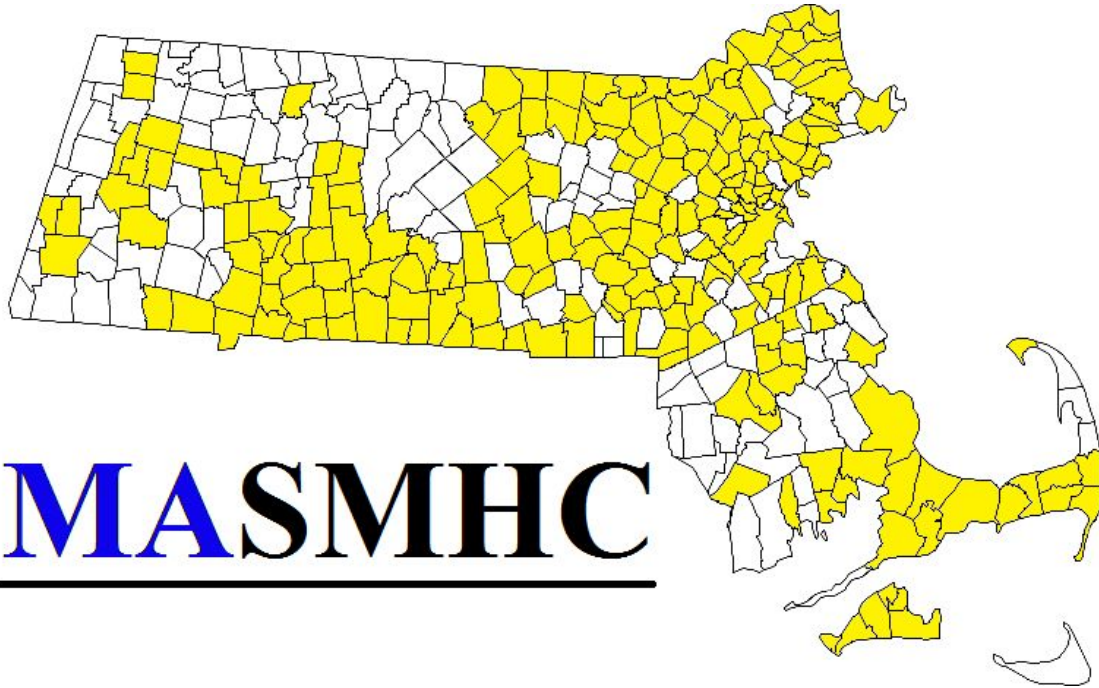
Schools are the nation's primary service providers for students...if students are present.

- Physical health services and programming
- Mental health services
- Access to food
- Access to clothing
- Education
- Social connection
- Peer relationships
- Access to prosocial activities
- Access to referral services to community based service agencies



**Remember: The same students who are disproportionately impacted by chronic absenteeism experience health inequity due to disproportionately reduced access to the services and supports offered by schools.**

# MAssachusetts School Mental Health Consortium



**MASMHHC**



**[www.masmhc.org](http://www.masmhc.org)**

**John Crocker:**

**[jncrocker@methuen.k12.ma.us](mailto:jncrocker@methuen.k12.ma.us)**

**978-722-6000 ext: 1154**

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