



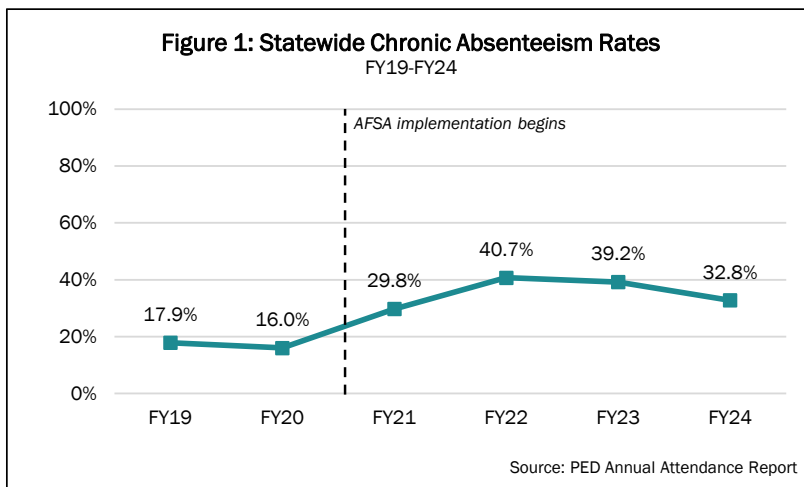
Policy Brief

Engaging Schools, Higher Attendance: A Systemic Approach

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Numerous legislative reports and research produced both in New Mexico and nationally have established the imperative of increasing school attendance to curb New Mexico’s soaring chronic absenteeism rates. Longstanding research shows regular attendance benefits students’ academic, social, and emotional wellbeing. Being in school also allows students the opportunity to engage meaningfully with courses and curriculum, interact with educators and peers, and actively participate in classroom environments, all of which helps students grasp and retain essential knowledge and skills. Missing school, particularly when it occurs often and regularly, disrupts this process, contributing to gaps in learning and hindering the development of academic, social, and emotional skills.



Key Takeaways

- PED reports a chronic absence rate of 32.8 percent for the 2023-2024 school year, a significant decrease (*Page 1*).
- High daily attendance rates can mask chronic absence—as schools primarily use attendance rates and the state uses chronic absence rates, coherence on strategies may be misaligned (*Pages 2-3*).
- Chronic absence is a symptom of a lack of broader “systemic health” in schools (*Pages 4-5*).
- More than attendance interventions are needed. Schools must also create healthier school systems, and the state can do more to support these efforts (*Pages 7-8*).

Despite the importance of attendance being well documented, New Mexico has struggled to adequately address its high chronic absenteeism rate, which reached a high of 40 percent in the 2021-2022 school year, the highest in the United States at the time. Recent data indicates the state’s chronic absence rates may be showing signs of improvement but remains stubbornly high, with the Public Education Department (PED) reporting a statewide chronic absence rate of 32 percent for the 2023-2024 school year. In other words, one in three students in New Mexico is missing more than 10 percent of time in the classroom.

The root causes behind why students miss school are complex and varied, making chronic absence an inherently challenging problem to address. This policy brief seeks to deepen the discussion of school attendance, demonstrating that chronic absence is not only a cause of poor student outcomes, but a *symptom* of broader system-wide dysfunction. Persistently high rates of chronic absenteeism may be indicative of a growing perception that school is not a valuable, worthwhile endeavor for students. Understanding each school as a reflection of the health of the community in which it operates can deepen policymakers’ understanding of which interventions are necessary, the roles the various actors in the education system play in reducing absenteeism, and where legislative efforts can have the greatest impact.

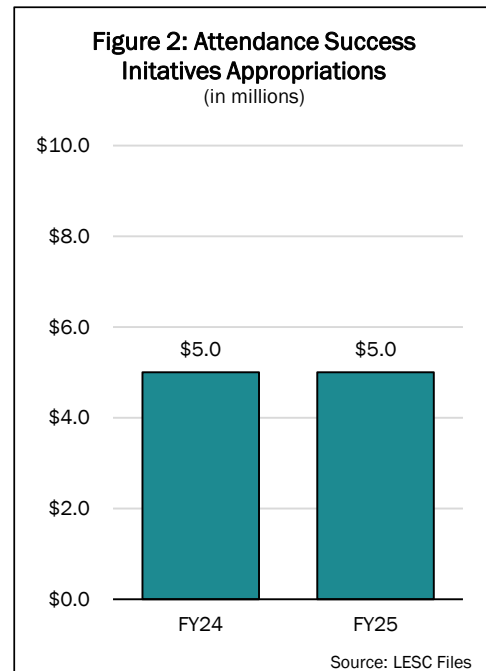
A Review of New Mexico’s Attendance Policies

New Mexico has created a policy framework and invested funds to support school attendance. In 2019, the Legislature passed, and the governor signed, the Attendance for Success Act (AFSA), codified into law at [Section 22-12A-1 through 22-12A-14 NMSA 1978](#). The AFSA repealed an existing compulsory school attendance law, replacing it in its entirety and transitioning the state to a focus on a comprehensive, preventative, and data-driven approach to supporting attendance. The AFSA universalized a definition for chronic absence (defined as missing 10 percent of school for any reason, excused or unexcused), established a four-tiered structure to identify and address attendance challenges based on rates of chronic absence, and codified specific responsibilities at the school, district, and department level related to attendance.

The AFSA was a major bipartisan undertaking, with the Legislative Education Study Committee (LESC) voting to endorse the bill, and many members of the committee working substantively on the policy proposal and design. Previous LESC [research](#) explains that, while the law was designed to meet many national best practices, its implementation was stymied by the Covid-19 pandemic. With the measure passing in 2019 and provisions of the law slated to begin in 2020, the rollout of the AFSA became complicated by schools simultaneously responding to the pandemic.

In addition to the policy framework offered by the AFSA, the Legislature has also supported attendance with funding. In both FY24 and FY25, the Legislature allocated \$5 million in direct funding for attendance success initiatives to PED. The FY24 appropriation was used by PED to support grants to seven of the largest school districts in the state, fund an attendance campaign, and to host an attendance conference.

Beyond these initiatives, Legislative Finance Committee (LFC) staff have also found “[school] districts also spent at least \$19.8 million on staff in FY23, with at least 64 districts funding attendance for personnel with their operational funds.”



Distinguishing Between Attendance and Chronic Absence

In discussions about school attendance, the terms “attendance” and “chronic absence” are often used interchangeably. The distinction is more than semantics; these two terms represent distinct concepts, and their related measures capture vastly different data points. The conversation on attendance and chronic absence benefits from clarity in using these terms for two primary reasons: 1) high attendance rates can mask high chronic absence rates; and 2) the strategies used to encourage high attendance may differ from those used to address chronic absence.

High Attendance Rates Mask Chronic Absence

Previous national [research](#) has pointed out the complex interplay of two key attendance metrics: daily average attendance rates and chronic absence rates. Daily classroom attendance measures the percentage of students who attend school on any given day but does not account for the cumulative effect of absences over time. Even if a school has a high average daily attendance rate, students who are absent may still see higher rates of chronic absence, particularly if a small group of students is consistently missing school. This problem can be clarified using the following example:

- Consider a school that has 100 students and a 90 percent attendance rate for an entire month of school. On paper, this looks promising; 90 out of 100 students have been in school every day for that month. However, 10 percent of the students attending that same school (10

students) could have missed an entire month of school and the overall attendance rate would have remained at 90 percent.

- *Chronic absence is not simply the opposite of attendance rates—even in schools with high daily attendance rates, serious issues with chronic absence can exist. National [analysis](#) of 2023 attendance data across three states found that even in school districts with 90 percent attendance rates, chronic absence still ranged from 28 percent to 46 percent.*

For schools, it is much easier to take daily attendance and analyze average attendance rates at various time intervals (daily, weekly, monthly) than it is to calculate and track chronic absenteeism. Some schools and districts may not even calculate chronic absence rates at all, instead providing data to district or state offices and receiving chronic absence calculations in return. Further complicating the issue, the numerator (number of missed days of school) and the denominator (number of school days) of the chronic absence rate continually shift with each passing school day in a school year, making chronic absence rates a continually changing number.

Accurate and timely data are necessary for schools to participate in interventions. If chronic absence rates are received well after a student has become chronically absent, schools lose valuable days where early intervention may be possible. LESC staff continue to hear concerns about data quality, which is marred by a lack of consistent attendance-taking practices in schools as well as questions from schools about the accuracy of chronic absence rate calculations they receive back from the PED.

A Focus on Attendance or Chronic Absence Impacts How Schools Respond

Even though the AFSA directs interventions based on percentages of chronic absence, the day-to-day focus of schools may instead be on attendance rates. FutureEd, an independent think tank at Georgetown University’s McCourt School of Public Policy, has [pointed out](#) “complacency about absenteeism may have to do with the attendance data that school leaders see.” If school leaders primarily use attendance rates, and the state primarily uses chronic absence rates, there will be inherent tension in actions schools take, and outcomes that can be expected.

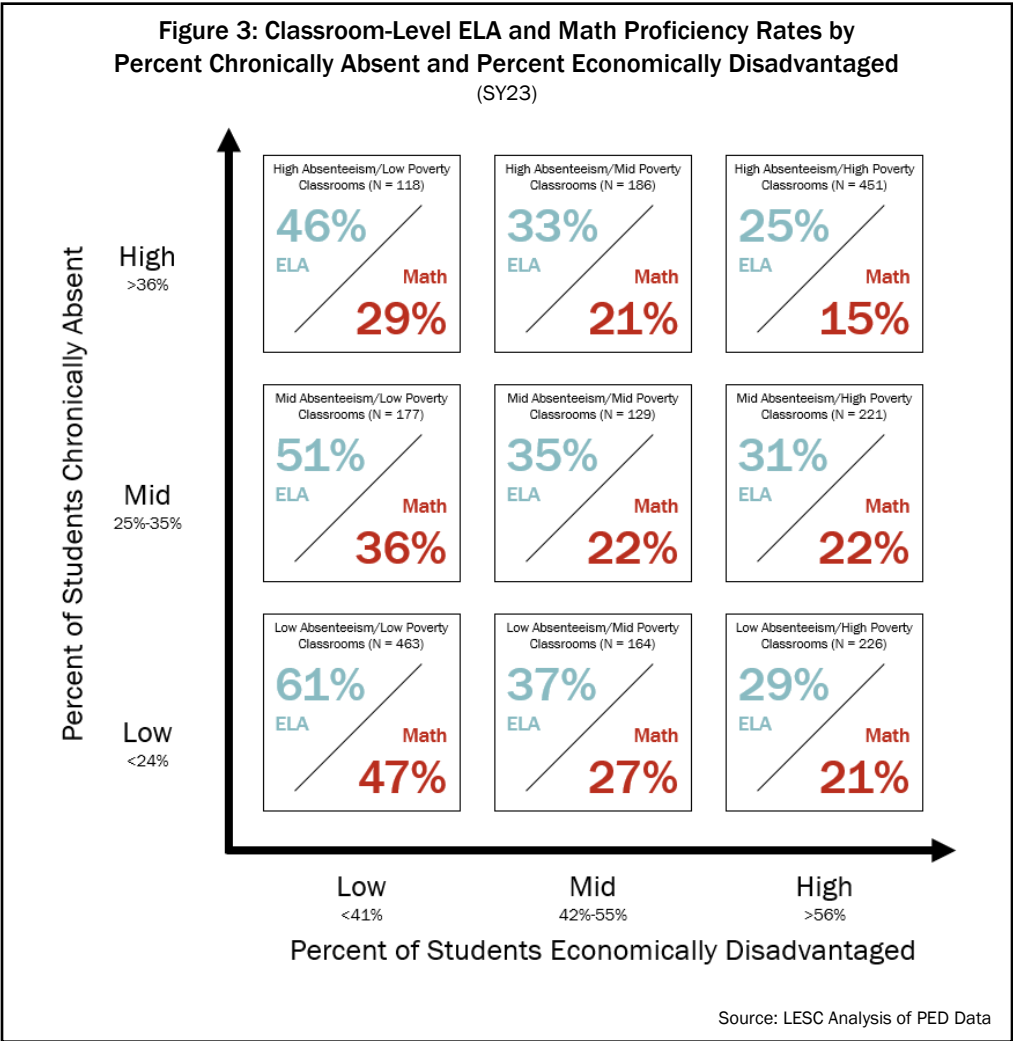
The strategies to improve school attendance and address chronic absenteeism often overlap, but are distinct in their focus and intensity due to the underlying nature, and desired outcome, associated with each:

- Improving general school attendance can be achieved by addressing school climate issues, fostering strong relationships between students and staff, promoting the value of education, and ensuring students feel safe and supported at school.
- Addressing chronic absence is achieved through targeted interventions. It necessitates identifying underlying causes of frequent and high levels of absenteeism, which can vary widely and be caused by entirely different issues such as health challenges, transportation barriers, mental health concerns, family challenges, or disengagement from school. Strategies to address chronic absence often include personalized outreach, providing wraparound services, developing attendance intervention plans, and collaborating with additional community organizations outside of the school setting to support students who face significant barriers to attending school.

Schools need procedures to monitor both attendance *and* chronic absence and will need distinct strategies to encourage attendance and address chronic absence. As New Mexico has shifted to a focus on chronic absenteeism, it may have inadvertently emphasized the most extreme challenges, and in turn, neglected some of the most foundational strategies critical to the overall health of the educational system.

Expanding the Understanding of Chronic Absence

Analysis on attendance issues to date has shown chronic absence is a [driver](#) of poor educational outcomes. This finding aligns with the existing body of research on attendance and chronic absenteeism, which consistently finds causal evidence that students who are chronically absent experience numerous adverse educational impacts both while in school and in long-term educational and career prospects. However, additional inquiry also finds chronic absence functions as both a cause of poor outcomes *and* a symptom of poor environments.



For instance, LESC staff presented [findings](#) in June 2024 that chronic absence is correlated with schools’ levels of poverty, creating a compounding effect on student achievement. As shown in Figure 3, as chronic absenteeism increases in high-income schools, the percentage of students who are proficient falls from 61 percent to 46 percent in English language arts (ELA) and from 47 percent to 29 percent in math. Achievement also tends to be lower as poverty increases; low-income students with high rates of chronic absenteeism see the lowest levels of proficiency in the state, with only 25 percent proficient in ELA and 15 percent in math. While chronic absence clearly contributes to declines in student achievement, it may also be a broader symptom of the health of schools and the communities in which those schools operate.

Exploring Chronic Absence as a Symptom

Even as the state, alongside school districts and charter schools, has invested in policy support and funding to address attendance challenges, deeper investigation finds chronic absenteeism in schools may be more akin to a persistent medical symptom. Just as a recurring symptom in a patient signals a more serious underlying condition, chronic absenteeism may also reflect system-wide dysfunction that needs to be addressed to improve student attendance and, ultimately, educational outcomes.

Furthering the medical analogy, consider a high chronic absence rate as a patient might consider a persistent symptom like high blood pressure. A doctor treating these issues would be unlikely to focus only on alleviating

the patient's blood pressure. Instead, they might both prescribe a medication to treat high blood pressure while also looking for root causes, which might range from lifestyle factors to more serious diseases.

The causes of chronic absenteeism are complex and multifaceted, much like the intricate interplay of factors that contribute to chronic health conditions. These can range from individual issues, such as student health challenges or family instability, to broader social determinants like poverty, inadequate access to healthcare, housing instability, or even more deeply to held family beliefs, behaviors, and habits related to school.

In this context, schools often operate as general practitioners with limited tools at their disposal, trying to manage a complex condition that requires specialized care and resources beyond their reach. While short-term interventions can act as prescriptions for the symptom of chronic absence, truly reducing chronic absenteeism requires system-wide changes that improve the health of the education system as a whole. Just as a holistic health plan might include lifestyle changes, medical interventions, and community support, improving attendance requires coordinated efforts across multiple sectors, including education, healthcare, social services, and community organizations.

To holistically improve attendance and lower chronic absence rates, New Mexico must adopt a comprehensive “treatment plan” that addresses the root causes of a chronic condition. This means not only providing immediate interventions, but also making schools more engaging and supportive, reckoning with the broader social inequalities that create barriers to regular attendance, and adapting school environments to better serve the interests and learning needs of students.

Underlying Challenges

If high chronic absence rates are then a symptom of broader dysfunction, what then are the underlying challenges behind our attendance malaise? As previously noted, attendance remains a deeply complex school challenge. Previous LESC research has identified consensus around the importance of school attendance in improving both short- and long-term outcomes in educational pursuits, workforce opportunities, academics, and student wellbeing, yet a multitude of root causes may impede this for students.

Additionally, LESC staff have previously encouraged an ecological approach to understanding attendance challenges that takes into account the environment and communities in which schools operate as important factors in solving the state's chronic absenteeism crisis. An ecological view considers both school-based challenges and solutions, but also how community indicators (such as poverty) or competing interests for students' time (such as obligations to work), interplay with the school environment.

The underlying challenges that contribute to student absenteeism often include the following:

- **Socioeconomic factors.** Students from low-income families face challenges like unstable housing and food insecurity. These factors can make regular attendance difficult, as basic needs take precedence.
- **Mental health and well-being.** Students experiencing mental health challenges such as anxiety, depression, or trauma may avoid school due to stress or fear of social interactions.
- **School environment.** A hostile school environment where bullying is present or where students don't feel safe can result in higher rates of absenteeism. Students may avoid school to escape negative social interactions or unsafe conditions. Conversely, positive relationships with caring adults in the school can foster a sense of accountability and support, encouraging attendance.
- **Barriers to attending school.** Inconsistent or unreliable transportation, or chronic health conditions can physically prevent students from attending school regularly.
- **Competing interests and a perceived decline in the value of education.** Some students may question the relevance of their education, especially if they do not see a direct connection between what they learn in school and their future goals or careers.

A Decline in the Perceived Value of Education

Every day, each student in New Mexico faces a critical question: “do I attend school today?” In recent years, a growing number of students have reported feeling [disconnected](#) from the school environment and [disengaged](#) from what they are being taught. This disconnect is particularly evident in the rise of chronic absenteeism, where students miss significant portions of the school year, perhaps, at least in part, because they, and/or their families, find the traditional school environment irrelevant and uninspiring. In other words, compounding known root causes that students may be chronically absent, the [perceived value](#) of attending school may also be in decline.

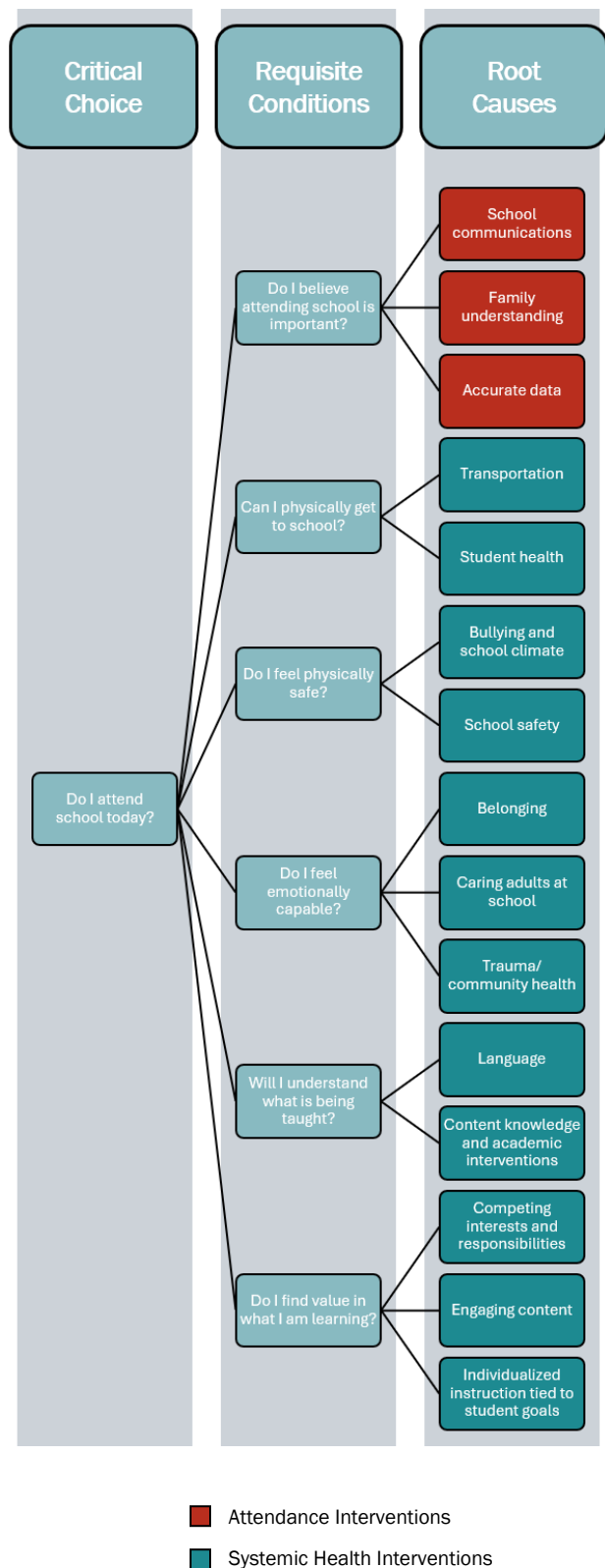
Figure 4 demonstrates how students’ decision to attend school is the result of several different mental calculations, inseparably related to beliefs about the importance of attendance, the physical barriers they face, the physical safety of the school environment, their emotional health and motivation, their grasp of academic content, and their perceived value of the education they receive relative to other competing interests. For the primary question—do I attend school today—to be answered, Figure 4 notes the conditions required for the answer to be “yes.”

Some requisite conditions have been clearly known—for example, physically being able to get to school. However, other requisite conditions are newer and reflect societal shifts that may also be contributing to a declining public perception of the value of school.

The rise of smartphones, social media, and widespread internet access have made it easier for students to find [alternative avenues for learning and engaging](#) with the world, which may also reduce the perceived necessity of physically attending school. Students face significant [mental health challenges](#) and socioeconomic influences in today’s world, as well. For example, secondary students may need to work to support their family financially. Compounding this trend, the Covid-19 pandemic physically removed students from school environments, leaving many students and/or their families feeling that school is no longer essential to their personal or academic growth.

As students’ needs have evolved, it has become evident that current school structures may not be aligned to support the needs of students today.

Figure 4: Mapping Students’ Decision to Attend School



Source: LESC Files

Systemic Changes to Address the Health of the Education System

Recalling the medical analogy, it becomes evident attendance interventions can have only a limited effect on alleviating deep, systemic, societal shifts in the perceived value of school. If we understand chronic absenteeism as a symptom of the failing health of New Mexico’s public education system, the state must play a dual role, both to treat chronic absenteeism as a symptom by offering short-term attendance interventions, while simultaneously affecting [systemic change](#) to improve school climates, address holistic student development, and ensure school content is engaging and relevant to students’ academic journeys. Every actor in the state’s education system, including educators, school districts, the PED, and the Legislature must do their part to ensure the system is healthy and thriving.

School Districts and Schools

School districts and schools can design a comprehensive approach to attendance by simultaneously promoting effective attendance interventions and creating the conditions necessary to improve school attendance. Accurate data collection, development and consistent implementation of attendance plans, and strategic communication are critical strategies to address students who are beginning to show signs of chronic absence. These strategies are highly effective when employed early to engage with students and families, even before students are considered “chronically absent.”

In addition to remediating absenteeism, educators should evaluate their school environments and design education programs that naturally facilitate high attendance. Schools should consider whether their transportation programs are effective for students, whether instruction is culturally relevant and engaging, and whether the school’s culture and climate allows students to feel safe and supported. Schools can also play a critical role in supporting families by connecting them with community resources. Finally, schools and districts should also consider improvements to teaching as a career, including providing necessary support to prioritize attendance-related efforts, but also prioritizing time for teacher collaboration and preparation. Many schools are already engaging in this work across New Mexico; school districts and schools may consider using Table 1 as an inventory of strategies to address both attendance interventions and systemic health.

Table 1. School District and School Attendance Inventory

Attendance Interventions School districts and schools should employ effective interventions to improve attendance.	Systemic Health Interventions School districts and schools should strive to create the conditions for high attendance.
<p>Data Collection</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Incentivize teachers to take attendance daily • Ensure attendance data is accurate <p>Attendance Plans</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Engage in authentic root cause analysis • Designate responsibilities for interventions • Cultivate schoolwide buy-in for attendance improvement plans • Include all relevant staff in the formation and implementation of attendance plans, including teachers, counselors, school nurses, etc. <p>Communication Strategy</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attendance communications should... <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Be timely • Be written in students’ home language at an accessible reading level • Provide context for students’ absences (how many absences compared to school average) 	<p>Transportation Program</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Design school transportation programs that reduce barriers to transportation <p>Value and Relevance of School</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide high-quality, culturally relevant instruction • Understand students’ individual goals and help them progress toward their own aspirations • Create opportunities for applied learning that engages students cognitively, physically, and emotionally <p>School Culture</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop deep, respectful relationships with every student • Ensure students feel safe to attend school • Ensure schools are welcoming spaces for parents <p>Supporting Families Outside of Schools</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understand what resources are available in a community • Connect families with necessary services, including mental health services, economic resources, and basic necessities like clothing, meals, and shelter <p>Professional Work</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure teachers have dedicated time for attendance • Ensure teachers have dedicated time for collaboration • Create structures for needed adults, perhaps beyond teachers, in classrooms

Public Education Department

Similarly, PED’s key responsibilities in improving student attendance exist in both supporting effective interventions as well as fostering a healthy public education system. To improve attendance improvement plans, PED’s role includes developing and guiding consistent policies on data collection and attendance practices, supporting schools in aligning with these guidelines, and providing training and technical assistance as needed. PED is also responsible for collecting, analyzing, and publishing attendance data in a timely fashion, helping to identify trends and support schools that need additional resources. PED should create a framework of shared accountability between schools, districts, and the state for attendance improvement, while also revising the development of attendance plans to include root cause analysis and systemic health improvements.

PED also faces the colossal task of fostering a healthy education system through effective state governance. PED will need to work to build collective trust in the state education system through strong, sustained, productive oversight, positive relationships with schools, and clear, consistent statewide goals for attendance and achievement. By building bridges to school districts and schools across the state, PED can support innovative practices that reengage students. PED must also dedicate time and effort to the creation of a transportation distribution that meets school districts’ needs, as well as design professional development in topics related to attendance like trauma-informed education, cultural and linguistic responsiveness, and student engagement strategies. Finally, PED can collaborate with other state agencies to address broader systemic issues that impact students’ ability to attend school regularly. This includes codified expectations to work with the Children, Youth, and Families Department (CYFD) when warranted.

Table 2. Public Education Department Attendance Inventory

Attendance Interventions PED should <u>provide access to effective interventions</u> to improve attendance.	Systemic Health Interventions PED should <u>strive to create the statewide conditions</u> for high attendance.
<p>Policy Development and Guidance</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop consistent guidance on data collection practices • Ensure school attendance practices are aligned with statewide guidance • Support schools in reaching alignment with guidance (via training, technical assistance) <p>Data Collection</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collect, aggregate, and publish timely data on student attendance • Analyze data to identify trends, effective strategies, and schools that need additional support <p>Attendance Plans</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create shared ownership and accountability for attendance goals between schools, districts, and the state • Revise structure for attendance improvement plans to include the following elements: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Authentic root cause analysis ○ Balance of attendance interventions and systemic health improvements • Establish metrics to monitor success of implementation • Support schools and districts in crafting meaningful attendance improvement plans <p>Communication Strategy</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide resources and templates for schools to engage in effective communication 	<p>Effective State Governance</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide strong, sustained, productive oversight for public education statewide • Foster trust in the state education system • Improve relationships and partnerships with schools and school leaders • Develop statewide goals for attendance and achievement and monitor progress <p>Value and Relevance of School</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduce barriers to innovative practices and school schedules designed to reengage students <p>Transportation Programs</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work within statutory guidelines to build a transportation distribution that effectively meets districts’ needs <p>School Leadership Development</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure educators and school leaders are well-prepared to enter the classroom and supported when they arrive • Provide relevant and meaningful professional development, including topics tied to attendance like trauma-informed education, cultural and linguistic responsiveness, and student engagement strategies <p>Supporting Families Outside of School</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collaborate with other state agencies like the Early Childhood Education and Care Department, the Department of Health, and the Children, Youth and Families Department (CYFD) to address systemic issues related to poverty in education • Ensure partnership with CYFD, particularly when required by codified AFSA expectations for students identified as excessively absent

New Mexico State Legislature

Finally, the Legislature can also play a role in enabling effective attendance interventions and fostering systemic health improvements across New Mexico's education system. While the Legislature has made significant efforts to create a policy framework to measure and address chronic absenteeism, additional steps can be taken to strengthen the framework. Enhancements to the AFSA can clarify the roles of attendance teams, set clear expectations for district, school, and individual attendance plans, and allocate resources to support interventions at each attendance tier. Additionally, the Legislature must ensure that PED has the capacity and staffing to support authentic engagement with school attendance teams and provide schools and districts with the necessary resources to implement these plans. With additional PED capacity to oversee attendance interventions, the Legislature can ensure that any additional funding allocated for specific attendance interventions, such as communication strategies and partnerships with community organizations, are effectively leveraged to improve attendance.

In terms of systemic health interventions, the Legislature continues to make strong progress on a redesigned state equalization guarantee and funding for engaging school activities like career technical education and out-of-school-time programs. However, additional work can be done to improve the health of the education system. In recent years, the Legislature has debated effective models of state education governance. Reforms may be necessary to stabilize state education leadership, establish shared statewide educational goals with ongoing progress monitoring, and address school transportation, as suggested by a 2023 report on the transportation distribution. The Legislature should oversee data governance by ensuring that PED's data collection and analysis practices are effective and transparent, potentially through an independent agency. Finally, the Legislature should recognize the importance of community wellbeing by developing a framework for cross-agency collaboration and cultivating partnerships with organizations dedicated to education and community health, ensuring that students' needs are met both inside and outside of school.

Table 3. New Mexico Legislature Attendance Inventory

Attendance Interventions The Legislature should enable effective interventions to improve attendance.	Systemic Health Interventions The Legislature should strive to create the statewide conditions for high attendance.
<p>Policy Framework</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bolster Attendance for Success Act to clarify tiers and evidence-based activities and interventions • Clarify the membership and roles of attendance teams • Provide clear expectations for development of... <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • District-level attendance plans • School-level attendance plans • Individual student interventions <p>Funding</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ensure PED has capacity and staffing to support authentic engagement with school attendance teams • Provide schools and districts with the resources necessary to implement attendance plans • Provide funding for specific attendance interventions, including strong communication strategies and connections with community organizations 	<p>School Transportation</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make school transportation a priority, including a redesign of the transportation funding formula <p>Effective State Governance</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reform structure of state education to stabilize state leadership for education • Establish shared statewide educational goals and monitor progress <p>Data Governance</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identify a mechanism to oversee PED data collection and analysis practices • Consider a framework for a trusted independent agency responsible for data warehousing, reporting, analysis, and evaluation • Ensure data is shared in a timely and transparent manner for all stakeholders <p>Address Community Wellbeing</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognize the need for supports outside of school in New Mexico's diverse communities • Develop a framework for meaningful cross-agency collaboration to promote healthy communities • Cultivate external partnerships with organizations engaged in education and community wellbeing