

(1/1/25 – District Administrator’s Corner Article)

The pandemic may be over, but recovery of some challenging habits is certainly not. As we head into the second half of the school year, expect a focus on chronic absenteeism. What is chronic absenteeism? While the definition of chronic absenteeism varies from state to state and district to district, it’s generally defined as missing 10% or more of school days—even for illnesses. Chronic absenteeism is also a measure that is reported on the School Report Card that is issued by the Department of Public Instruction (<https://apps2.dpi.wi.gov/reportcards/>)

Chronic absenteeism has declined a bit since reaching all-time highs during the 2021-2022 school year, but it’s still not back down to pre-pandemic numbers. Absenteeism impacts students and schools in some very critical ways:

- Students miss essential direct instruction and hands-on learning experiences that can't be replicated at home.
- Social connections and peer relationships suffer, affecting both academic and emotional development.
- Gaps in learning compound over time, making it harder for students to catch up.
- School funding and resources can be affected by attendance rates.

The pandemic complicated this issue in unexpected ways and it created some bad habits. When virtual learning became widespread during COVID-19, and students had access to learning online, some families began viewing in-person attendance as optional rather than essential. While online learning helped during the pandemic, it inadvertently changed the perceived value of being physically present in class. We need students here.

How is chronic absenteeism different from truancy? Truancy is defined by statute (s. 118.16), which states: “Truancy” means any absence of part or all of one or more days from school, but additionally, “Habitual truant” means a pupil who is absent from school without an acceptable excuse under sub. (4) and s. 118.15 for part or all of 5 or more days on which school is held during a school semester. When a student meets the definition of truancy, the school may file a referral to law enforcement. An officer will then issue a citation to the student and at least one parent/guardian. Yet, punitive measures often don’t work and support to school districts from our county officials is often lagging.

Ultimately, we are here to educate children and build the future for our communities. Part of our work is to analyze absences so we can help identify which students, or groups of students, might be in need of additional support. Once you know which students are at risk due to poor attendance, we can take stock of what we know about the reasons they do or don’t attend school. The staff of the River Valley School District is here to help, but we need to have the students here to provide them with their education.

Sincerely,  
Loren Glasbrenner, District Administrator  
River Valley School District