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Missing More Than School: Reducing Chronic Absence for American Indian and Alaska Native Students

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Introduction

Nearly half (47%) of American Indian/Alaska Native (AI/AN) students in the United States were chronically absent in school year (SY) 2021/22.¹ This represents a 16.8 percent increase from the 30 percent chronic absence rates of AI/AN students prior to the pandemic. These high levels of chronic absence are a red flag and reveal the urgent need to partner with AI/AN students, families, and communities to understand and address the challenges they face in attending and thriving in school.

Average daily attendance refers to the number of students attending school on a daily basis. *Truancy* refers to unauthorized absences from school. Different from both of these is *chronic absenteeism*, which is defined as missing 10 percent or more of scheduled school days, whatever the reason (e.g., excused absences, truancy, suspension). The rate of chronic absence serves as a sign that students are off track in learning to read by grade 3, achieving in middle school, and graduating from high school.²

- 1 Attendance Works. (2023, November 17). All hands on deck: Today's chronic absenteeism requires a comprehensive district response and strategy. <https://www.attendanceworks.org/todays-chronic-absenteeism-requires-a-comprehensive-district-response-and-strategy>
- 2 Balfanz, R., & Byrnes, V. (2012). *The importance of being in school: A report on absenteeism in the nation's public schools*. Johns Hopkins University Center for Social Organization of Schools. https://new.every1graduates.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/FINALChronicAbsenteeismReport_May16.pdf; Chang, H. N., & Romero, M. (2008). *Present, engaged, and accounted for: The critical importance of addressing chronic absence in the early grades*. National Center for Children in Poverty. https://www.nccp.org/wp-content/uploads/2008/09/text_837.pdf; Ehrlich, S. B., Gwynne, J. A., Stitzel Pareja, A., Allensworth, E. M., Moore, P., Jagesic, S., & Sorice, E. (2014). *Preschool attendance in Chicago public schools: Relationships with learning outcomes and reasons for absences*. University of Chicago Consortium on Chicago School Research. <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED553158.pdf>; Office of the Postsecondary Commissioner. (n.d.). *Rhode Island Longitudinal Data System*. Rhode Island Longitudinal Data System Center. <https://datasparkri.org/chronic-absence-kinder>; Utah Education Policy Center. (2012). *Chronic absenteeism* [Research brief]. University of Utah. <https://dagy2hvnfszx3.cloudfront.net/wp-content/uploads/sites/2/2017/05/23104652/ChronicAbsenteeismResearchBrief.pdf>



Students who are chronically absent also experience worse health outcomes.³ The extraordinarily high levels of chronic absence among AI/AN students likely contribute to disproportionately low graduation rates when compared to other ethnic/racial groups in the United States.⁴ As discussed in [the first article in this series](#), chronic absence reflects and contributes to educational inequity and widens historical gaps in achievement.⁵

This article explores the challenges that keep AI/AN students from attending school and offers solutions to support students, families, and communities. It is organized into the following sections:

- What is the scale, concentration, and impact of chronic absenteeism among AI/AN students?
- What are key factors contributing to the high levels of chronic absence among AI/AN students?
- Who needs to be involved in efforts to improve attendance among AI/AN students?
- What improves attendance and engagement among AI/AN students, and how do we ensure solutions are grounded in the realities, strengths, and historical experiences of AI/AN communities?

What Is the Scale, Scope, and Concentration of Chronic Absenteeism Among AI/AN Students?

One percent (almost 500,000) of all students nationwide are AI/AN students. But they are not a monolithic group: 574 federally recognized tribes and approximately 60 state-recognized tribes reside within the United States' borders. Approximately 229 of these ethnically, culturally, and linguistically diverse nations are located in Alaska; the other federally recognized tribes are located in 35 other states.

- 3 Allison, M. A., Attisha, E., COUNCIL ON SCHOOL HEALTH, Lerner, M., De Pinto, C. D., Beers, N. S., Gibson, E. J., Gorski, P., Kjolhede, C., O'Leary, S. C., Schumacher, H., & Weiss-Harrison, A. (2019). The link between school attendance and good health. *Pediatrics*, 143(2), e20183648. <https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2018-3648>
- 4 Nelson-Barber, S., & Boxerman, J. (2023). *Increasing American Indian and Alaska Native high school graduation rates: Strategies and recommendations for local education agency leaders in the Western states*. Western Educational Equity Assistance Center at WestEd. https://weeac.wested.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/Increasing-American-Indian_Alaska-Native-High-School-and-College-Graduation-Rates-in-the-Western-States-Brief_FINAL_ADA.pdf
- 5 AI/AN academic outcomes have not improved since 2007 according to the National School Board Association: Cai, J. (2020). *The condition of Native American students*. National School Board Association. <https://www.nsba.org/ASBJ/2020/December/condition-native-american-students>. Prior presidential reports show the continued failure of the U.S. school system to serve AI/AN students: National Indian Law Library. (n.d.). *Meriam Report: The problem of Indian administration (1928)*. <https://narf.org/nill/resources/meriam.html>; the 1969 Kennedy Report: National Indian Law Library. (n.d.). *Indian education: A national tragedy – A national challenge (Kennedy Report)*. <https://narf.org/nill/resources/education/reports/kennedy/toc.html>; and Obama's 2014 report: Executive Office of the President. (2014). *2014 Native youth report*. The White House. https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/sites/default/files/docs/20141129nativeyouthreport_final.pdf



While some AI/AN students attend schools with peers who share a similar ethnic background, many do not. The states with the largest share of AI/AN students are Alaska, Montana, New Mexico, Oklahoma, and South Dakota. According to the [National Indian Education Association](#), about a quarter (24%) of AI/AN public school students attend schools that comprise a majority of AI/AN students. More than half of AI/AN students attend a school where they are fewer than 10 percent of the student population.

As Figure 1 illustrates, students experienced chronic absence rates that are among the highest of any ethnic group before and in the aftermath of the pandemic.

Figure 1. Percentages of Chronically Absent Students by Ethnicity for SYs 2021/22 and 2017/18

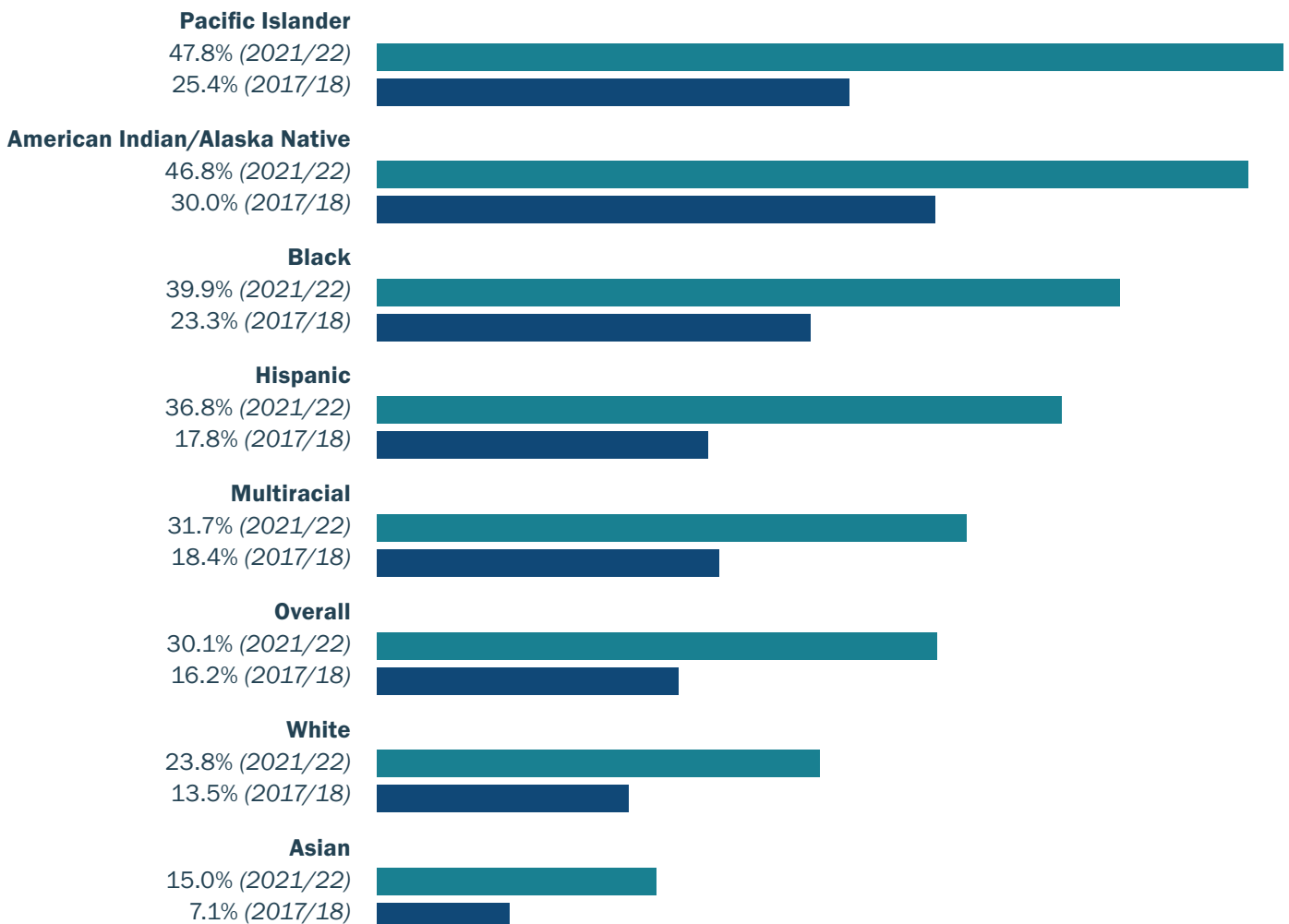
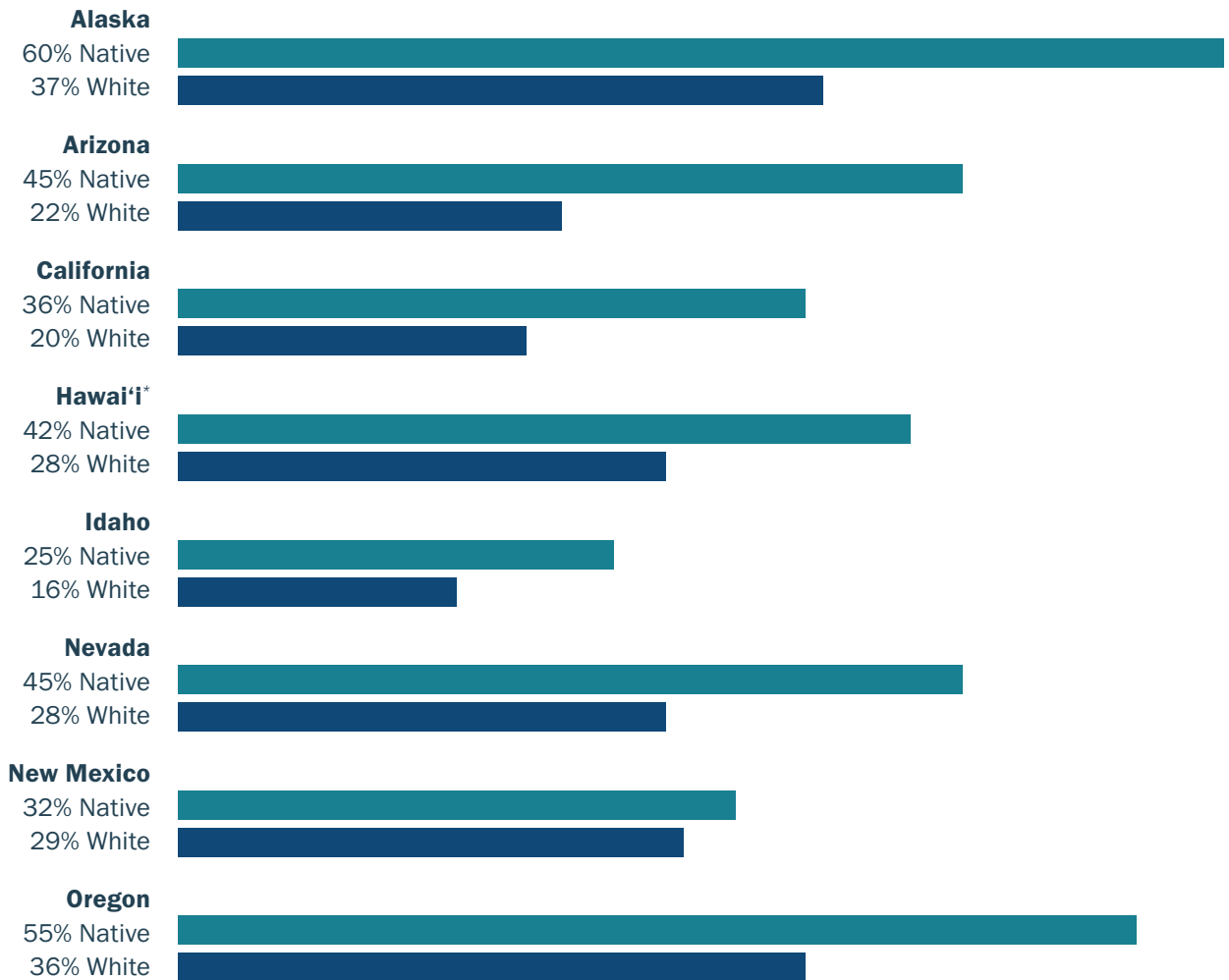




Figure 2 illustrates the distribution of chronic absence rates among AI/AN students across different states in the United States. Understanding this distribution is crucial because it highlights the geographical disparities in chronic absenteeism within the AI/AN student population. By examining how chronic absence rates vary across states, we can identify regions with particularly high or low rates, informing targeted interventions and policy efforts to address the issue effectively.

Figure 2. Chronic Absence Rates for Native and White Students 2022/23



*Hawai'i includes only native Hawaiian students.
Source: Department of Education for AZ, CA, HI, ID, NV NM, and OR (2022–23).

Who Counts as American Indian/Alaska Native?

The federal reporting method for counting AI/AN students is limited to those who self-identify racially as American Indian or Alaska Native only and not in combination with other races and who do not identify ethnically as Hispanic or Latine. As a result, the number of AI/AN students is estimated to be an undercount.

Read [Indigenous Students Count](#) for more information.

What Causes High Levels of Chronic Absence Among AI/AN Students?

Understanding the underlying causes of chronic absenteeism is essential for devising effective solutions to improve attendance. When large numbers of students are affected by chronic absenteeism, it often indicates systemic challenges in the community and in schools that are beyond a student’s or family’s control. These challenges may include barriers such as lack of access to health care, unreliable transportation, unstable housing, lack of safe paths to school, and community violence. Moreover, factors within the school environment, such as an unwelcoming school climate, biased disciplinary or attendance practices, the lack of a meaningful and culturally relevant curriculum, bullying, and undiagnosed learning disabilities, can also contribute to chronic absenteeism.⁶ These conditions not only make it difficult for students to learn when in the classroom but also exacerbate absenteeism by causing students to miss even more school.

Figure 3 groups the reasons for absenteeism into four categories: barriers, aversion, disengagement, and misconceptions.

Figure 3. Root Causes of Chronic Absenteeism

Barriers	Aversion	Disengagement	Misconceptions
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chronic and acute illness • Family responsibilities or home situation • Traumatic experiences • Limited transportation options • Housing and food insecurity • Inequitable access to essential services • Involvement with social services • Unpredictability in learning schedules • Limited access to technology • Exposure to community violence 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Academic and/or behavioral struggles • Unwelcoming school climate • Experience with social and peer challenges • Anxiety • Biased disciplinary and suspension practices • Lack of diagnosis for disabilities and/or accommodations • Caregivers’ negative educational experiences 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Insufficient access to challenging, culturally responsive instruction • Experience of boredom • Lack of meaningful relationships with adults in the school (especially given staff shortages) • Deprivation of enrichment opportunities • Lack of academic and behavioral support • Lack of success in earning credits • Conflict between the needing to work and attending school 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Belief that absences are only problematic if they are unexcused • Misunderstanding that missing 2 days per month doesn’t affect learning • Tendency to lose track and underestimate TOTAL absences • Assumption that students must stay home for any symptom of illness • Misperception that attendance only matters in the older grades • Incorrect belief that suspensions don’t count as absence

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6 Brundage, A. H., Castillo, J. M., & Batsche, G. M. (2017). *Reasons for chronic absenteeism among secondary students*. Florida Department of Education; University of South Florida. <https://www.hsredesign.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/Aggregate-RCA-Report-Final-1.pdf>; Chang, H., Osher, D., Schanfield, M., Sundius, J., & Bauer, L. (2019). *Using chronic absence data to improve conditions for learning*. Attendance Works; American Institutes for Research; Attendance Works & Healthy Schools Campaign. (2015). *Mapping the early attendance gap: Charting a course for student success*. <https://www.attendanceworks.org/mapping-the-early-attendance-gap/>; McNeely, C., Chang, H. N., & Gee, K. (2023). *Disparities in unexcused absences across California schools*. Policy Analysis for California Education. <https://edpolicyinca.org/publications/disparities-unexcused-absences-across-california-schools/>; Allison et al., 2019.



Issues commonly affecting the attendance of AI/AN students fall within these categories. Prior to the pandemic, AI/AN communities already faced significant barriers, including a higher prevalence of chronic and acute illness, limited access to health care, unreliable transportation, and food insecurity. The COVID-19 pandemic further exacerbated these challenges, with Native Americans experiencing the highest COVID-19 mortality rates of any ethnic group, reaching 2.5 times higher than those of White people.⁷ As a result, AI/AN students are more likely to experience the trauma of losing a beloved family member, teacher, or close family friend alongside economic and social hardships. At the same time, the poverty rates for AI/AN children have more than doubled, surpassing prepandemic levels following the loss of safety net supports offered during the pandemic.⁸

While these issues present significant challenges for regular school attendance by AI/AN students, they are layered on historical events that still echo and affect student attendance to this day.

The relationships of AI/AN students, families, and communities with educational institutions continue to be deeply and adversely affected by the historical legacy of American Indian boarding schools. Founded with the intent of eliminating traditional cultures and languages and forcing assimilation into mainstream America, these boarding schools inflicted long-term physical and psychological damage.⁹ Survivors of this system endure today, and the generational distrust resulting from these experiences is easily compounded when current curricula and instruction lack cultural responsiveness or perpetuate stereotypes about AI/AN people and communities.

In recent years, school systems' biased responses to absenteeism may further contribute to this distrust. As documented in this [blog post](#), poor attendance often leads to charges of educational neglect and the removal of AI/AN students from their homes. Additionally, AI/AN students are more likely to have their absences labeled as unexcused rather than excused. While excused absences carry no negative consequences, unexcused absences can lead to denied credit for missed work, exclusion from extracurricular activities, and even legal actions.¹⁰ These responses, and the fears they instill, undermine efforts to partner with AI/AN students and families to improve attendance.

7 Williams, R. L. (2021, December 2). Native American deaths from COVID-19 highest among racial groups. *Princeton School of Public and International Affairs*. <https://spia.princeton.edu/news/native-american-deaths-covid-19-highest-among-racial-groups>

8 Cid-Martinez, I., & Marvin, S. (2023, November 30). Native American child poverty more than doubled in 2022 after safety net cutbacks: Child poverty rate is higher than before the pandemic. *Economic Policy Institute*. <https://www.epi.org/blog/native-american-child-poverty-more-than-doubled-in-2022-after-safety-net-cutbacks-child-poverty-rate-is-higher-than-before-the-pandemic>

9 Evans-Campbell, T., Walters, K. L., Pearson, C. R., & Campbell, C. D. (2012). Indian boarding school experience, substance use, and mental health among urban two-spirit American Indian/Alaska natives. *The American Journal of Drug and Alcohol Abuse*, 38(5), 421–427. <https://doi.org/10.3109/00952990.2012.701358>; Running Bear, U., Thayer, Z. M., Croy, C. D., Kaufman, C. E., Manson, S. M., & AI-SUPERPPF Team. (2019). The impact of individual and parental American Indian boarding school attendance on chronic physical health of Northern Plains Tribes. *Family & Community Health*, 42(1), 1–7. https://journals.lww.com/familyandcommunityhealth/abstract/2019/01000/the_impact_of_individual_and_parental_american.1.aspx

10 McNeely et al., 2023.



Who Needs to Be Involved in Efforts to Improve Attendance Among AI/AN Students?

Listening to AI/AN students, families, and community leaders is essential to fully understand the barriers that prevent students from getting to school and what would motivate and help students to show up every day. Key people to engage include the following:

- **parents, grandparents, and extended family members, including Elders, siblings, cousins, aunts, and uncles**, whose insights into familial dynamics and cultural values are invaluable
- **tribal education directors, tribal clinic administrators, social services directors, behavioral health directors, and culture and language directors**, who possess unique insights into the systemic barriers faced by AI/AN students and can offer solutions grounded in cultural understanding
- **leaders of tribal enterprises and departments**, whose involvement can provide resources and opportunities for collaboration on initiatives aimed at improving educational outcomes
- **Native parent committees**, who represent the interests and concerns of AI/AN families and can offer firsthand perspectives on the challenges students face
- **community-based, Native-serving organizational leaders**, who play a vital role in advocating for the needs of AI/AN communities and can provide valuable support in implementing culturally responsive interventions

Engaged allies, including educators, community leaders, policymakers, and administrators who work closely with AI/AN students and families, can provide insights into community conditions impacting attendance. Allies also play a crucial role in securing resources and dismantling policies or practices that perpetuate inequities.

Tips for Effective Engagement and Communication

When you are working with AI/AN families and community leaders, it is important to make sure that your communication approach is effective. Each Native nation is distinct. Cultural practices and communication preferences differ. This [resource](#) from the Office of the Tribal Advisor in California offers helpful considerations for developing approaches that foster and sustain meaningful engagement.¹¹

¹¹ Office of the Tribal Advisor. (n.d.). *Cultural humility: Basics for working with California Native Americans* [PowerPoint slides]. California for All. https://tribalaffairs.ca.gov/wp-content/uploads/sites/10/2020/11/OTA_Cultural-Humility-1.pdf



What Works to Improve Attendance?

To effectively reduce chronic absenteeism among AI/AN students, put in place [a tiered approach](#) that begins with prevention. This involves fostering partnerships with students and their families while collaborating with districts, schools, tribes, and communities. Such collaboration should be grounded in applying strategies that build upon their particular strengths and assets.

1. Invest in Positive Conditions for Learning

A key strategy for improving attendance is ensuring that schools provide the positive conditions for learning that motivate students to show up every day in the first place. Students are much more likely to come to school when they

- feel physically and emotionally healthy and safe;
- experience belonging, connectedness, and support;
- are academically challenged and engaged; and
- interact with socially and emotionally competent adults and students who support strong relationship building.

Establishing such positive conditions for AI/AN students can require explicitly addressing challenges faced especially by AI/AN students and families. Given the traumatic and difficult experiences AI/AN families continue to face in mainstream educational institutions, this requires school staff to pay explicit attention to identity safety. Through close consultation with local tribal educators and cultural specialists, schools may honor and include Native languages and culturally responsive curricula in campus life. Being inclusive of the cultural practices of students in graduation events, such as the wearing of regalia, may create positive and welcoming environments. Additionally, supporting student-initiated clubs and adopting the use of a [Land Acknowledgement](#) in campus events may contribute to greater visibility for AI/AN students. To further enhance cultural engagement, districts and schools can adopt policies facilitating cultural observances. This may include planning in advance for completion of assignments, integrating project-based learning focused on cultural practices, or adjusting the school calendar to accommodate participation in key cultural and community events. All these steps may require professional learning for staff who are unfamiliar with AI/AN histories and cultures.



2. Engage in Culturally Appropriate Universal Tier 1 Supports

When chronic absenteeism affects many students, it signals that Tier 1 supports should be expanded and deepened. Tier 1 strategies are aimed at encouraging better attendance for all students and at preventing absenteeism before it affects achievement and student well-being. High rates of chronic absence among AI/AN students may indicate that Tier 1 supports are not designed to meet their needs.

- **Recognize good and improved attendance.** Positive reinforcement of attainable goals is key to building the good habit of attendance. [Oregon's Tribal Attendance Pilot Program \(TAPP\)](#) highlights promising and best practices ranging from recognizing students with the most improved attendance to recognizing those who meet their attendance goals. Recognition can take the form of a mix of low-cost items, such as a brag tag, and culturally significant items, such as hand drums or beaded necklaces. Additionally, schools can display posters featuring AI/AN students with positive messaging about the value of attendance in school hallways.
- **Hold regular check-ins.** Students need to be seen, known, and appreciated. Morning greetings welcome students to school and should be positive, particularly for students who are tardy or returning after being absent to fulfill family or community obligations such as caring for a relative or attending a funeral. This counters the pushing out of students who may feel unwelcome after an extended leave.¹² Check-ins can also help staff determine whether a student needs extra care. For example, in the [Menominee](#) Indian School District, staff use morning check-ins to assess students' emotional state by asking "are you in the car or in the trunk?" and other similar questions.
- **Adapt school calendars.** It is better to anticipate and avoid conflicts in schedules. School districts and tribal governments can collaborate to negotiate agreements that provide flexibility for students to attend important cultural events. In one Tribal Attendance Pilot Project (TAPP) community, the district and the tribal government agreed that students attending cultural events would not be marked absent but rather exempt. Similarly, partnerships with local dentists and pediatricians have allowed for the scheduling of appointments during school breaks to minimize disruptions to attendance.

3. Partner With Tribal Governments to Remove Barriers

Tribal governments are essential partners for addressing attendance challenges. They can

- add staff to school teams that address attendance and who have the expertise and cultural knowledge to create bridges between schools, tribal Elders, and others who can act as mentors and role models;
- provide or supplement transportation (e.g., in rural Del Norte County, California, the Yurok Tribe's bus helps students who miss the district's yellow school bus get to school); and
- offer medical, dental, vision, behavioral health, and social services through clinics, mobile units, or transportation assistance.

¹² Nelson-Barber & Boxerman, 2023.



Conclusion

The high rates of chronic absence among AI/AN students require a robust, coordinated, and tiered response from the organizations that serve them. What proves effective for AI/AN students are many of the same things that work for all students: positive conditions for learning that make students want to come to school, strong Tier 1 strategies that encourage regular attendance, and Tier 2 early interventions and Tier 3 intensive interventions that remove barriers that prevent students from coming to school. By adapting these strategies to build on the assets and rich cultural contexts of AI/AN students, communities increase their chance of successfully reengaging AI/AN students in school.

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