



# CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM AND SCHOOL FACILITIES

## RESEARCH AND BEST PRACTICES FOR IMPROVING STUDENT ATTENDANCE

**S**chool facilities play an essential role in improving student attendance and academic achievement. Research shows the importance of providing well-maintained facilities and optimizing indoor environmental quality to help schools reduce chronic absenteeism for California's diverse students.

Improving attendance for all students is a major priority for the California Department of Education. A chronically absent student is defined as a pupil who is absent 10 percent or more of the school days they were expected to attend. Types of absences include excused absences, unexcused absences, out-of-school suspensions, and non-Average Daily Attendance (ADA)-generating independent study.<sup>1</sup>

### SCHOOL FACILITY CONDITIONS MATTER

Compelling evidence shows that quality school buildings are correlated with higher student attendance rates, as well as other positive student outcomes.

- Students in newer buildings outperform students in older facilities, and they show better outcomes for student attendance, health, and discipline.<sup>2</sup>
- Schools with better building conditions have up to 14 percent lower student suspension rates.<sup>3</sup>
- A study of self-contained middle school classrooms revealed a positive, correlative relationship between (1) the built environment, (2) absenteeism rates, (3) student perception of social climate, and (4) higher student test scores.<sup>4</sup>

The research also reveals that substandard facilities are correlated with lower attendance

rates and other poorer student outcomes.

- Research shows that schools in need of structural repair, schools that use temporary structures, and schools with understaffed janitorial services are less likely to be attended by students.<sup>5</sup>
- In run-down school facilities, students attended less days on average and had lower scores on standardized tests in English language arts (ELA) and math.<sup>6</sup>
- Substandard physical environments are strongly associated with truancy and other behavior problems in students.<sup>7</sup>
- Schools in lower socioeconomic districts and schools attended by younger students show the strongest associations between poor building conditions and absenteeism.<sup>8</sup>

The connection between school facility conditions and reducing chronic absenteeism is clear. Districts and schools that proactively conduct facilities condition assessments and ongoing maintenance contribute to improvements in student attendance and academic achievement. Investing in the quality of the school environment includes addressing deferred maintenance and improving facilities through modernization or new construction.

### INDOOR ENVIRONMENTAL QUALITY AND ATTENDANCE

Indoor environmental quality (IEQ) consists of conditions inside the built environment that affect student health and wellness. A study of higher education classroom environments showed that elements of IEQ, such as lighting and indoor air quality (IAQ), are associated with positive student outcomes, including

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student attendance.<sup>9</sup> This study correlates with research findings on specific environmental quality factors and their effect on kindergarten through grade twelve (K–12) educational outcomes, including improved attendance.<sup>10</sup>

### LIGHTING

Natural daylighting in the classroom has been shown to increase student test scores and promote better health. A two-year study of children attending elementary schools found that compared with students in classrooms with conventional lighting, students exposed to full-spectrum lighting had fewer absences per year and also showed enhanced health.<sup>11</sup> Additional summaries of school facilities research show that light in the classroom has a positive effect on attendance rates.<sup>12</sup>

There are simple solutions to improving student exposure to daylight, such as encouraging teachers to uncover windows and utilizing outdoor learning whenever conditions permit. New construction or modernization projects can incorporate facility design features such as skylights, solar tubes, and clerestory windows and use building orientation to help maximize indoor daylight.

### INDOOR AIR QUALITY

Chronic and acute illnesses are barriers to school attendance, but schools can take action to increase ventilation and improve indoor air quality. Ventilation refers to the supply of outdoor air that flows into a building, which decreases indoor concentrations of infectious diseases and pollutants. Ensuring that all indoor spaces have adequate ventilation can contribute to the health of students and helps to reduce illness absences.

Research has shown that improvements to ventilation result in increases in student performance, and several studies indicate that reduced respiratory health effects and

reduced student absence are associated with increased ventilation rates.<sup>13,14</sup>

Optimizing or upgrading mechanical heating, ventilation, and air conditioning (HVAC) systems and using natural ventilation by opening windows and doors can help to bring more outside air into classrooms. Using carbon dioxide (CO<sub>2</sub>) monitors can help to determine whether enough fresh air is being supplied to indoor learning environments.<sup>15</sup>

The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) Indoor Air Quality Tools for Schools Action Kit offers school resources, staff activities, and tools to improve indoor air quality problems at little to no cost. The EPA online materials include a framework for effective school IAQ management, on-demand training webinars, preventative maintenance guidance, and more information to help improve health and decrease student absenteeism.<sup>16</sup>

*The California Department of Education recognizes the integral part that school facilities play in national and state efforts to combat chronic absenteeism. Expanding awareness of school facilities research has the potential to positively impact student attendance when local educational agencies and educators contribute to creating optimal, equitable facility conditions and learning environments.*

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