Annenberg Institute
BROWN UNIVERSITY

EdWorkingPaper No. 26-1390

What are schools doing to improve attendance? Evidence from Michigan and Georgia

Jeremy Singer
University of Michigan-Flint

Sarah Winchell Lenhoff
Wayne State University

Jerome Graham
Michigan State University

Richard O. Welsh
Vanderbilt University

This study presents evidence from Michigan and Georgia on the strategies that schools are using to improve attendance and how those strategies vary across contexts. We find that schools in both states rely heavily on communication-based practices aimed at changing student or parent behavior. Practices focused on removing barriers or improving student experiences in school are less common. We find broad similarities between the states, and little variation across different school contexts within states. We do, however, highlight a few notable differences, which likely reflect distinct state policy contexts. Our findings offer a useful starting point to consider how states and districts can shape the adoption and implementation of different practices to improve attendance.

VERSION: January 2026

Suggested citation: Singer, Jeremy, Sarah Winchell Lenhoff, Jerome Graham, and Richard O. Welsh. (2026). What are schools doing to improve attendance? Evidence from Michigan and Georgia. (EdWorkingPaper: 26-1390). Retrieved from Annenberg Institute at Brown University: https://doi.org/10.26300/qdq6-4s07

What are schools doing to improve attendance? Evidence from Michigan and Georgia

Jeremy Singer
University of Michigan-Flint

Sarah Winchell Lenhoff
Wayne State University

Jerome Graham
Michigan State University

Richard O. Welsh
Vanderbilt University

Abstract

This study presents evidence from Michigan and Georgia on the strategies that schools are using to improve attendance and how those strategies vary across contexts. We find that schools in both states rely heavily on communication-based practices aimed at changing student or parent behavior. Practices focused on removing barriers or improving student experiences in school are less common. We find broad similarities between the states, and little variation across different school contexts within states. We do, however, highlight a few notable differences, which likely reflect distinct state policy contexts. Our findings offer a useful starting point to consider how states and districts can shape the adoption and implementation of different practices to improve attendance.

Keywords: *attendance, chronic absenteeism, educational policy, survey research*

Author Notes. Jeremy Singer, University of Michigan-Flint, is the corresponding author. He can be reached at 430 French Hall, 327 E. Kearsley Street, jersing@umich.edu, 810-762-3234. Sarah Winchell Lenhoff, Wayne State University, can be reached at 369 Education Building, 5425 Gullen Mall, sarah.lenhoff@wayne.edu, 313-577-0923. Jerome Graham, Michigan State University, can be reached at 620 Farm Lane, jgraham@msu.edu, 443-475-5472. Richard O. Welsh, Vanderbilt University, can be reached at 230 Appleton Place, richard.welsh.1@vanderbilt.edu.

Acknowledgements. Thank you to our partners and colleagues, who offered their time, support, and feedback as we conducted this study. In particular, we would like to thank Dr. Delsa Chapman and AnnMarie Mapes at the Michigan Department of Education; Elizabeth Newell and other members of the Michigan Department of Education's Attendance and Engagement team; the Georgia Department of Education; fellow researchers in the Attendance Researchers Consortium; and Julie Osburn, Lisa High-Crume, Joyce Martin, and Shannon Johnson at Wayne State University. Thanks to Bakhyt Zhumatay at Michigan State University for his support in cleaning and analyzing the Georgia survey data. Any errors are our own. The research reported here was supported in part by grants from the Joyce Foundation, the Walton Family Foundation, and the Center for Reinventing Public Education. The opinions expressed and findings and conclusions contained within are those of the authors and do not represent views or positions of the funders.

What are schools doing to improve attendance? Evidence from Michigan and Georgia

In the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, improving attendance has emerged as one of the pressing priorities in education. Nationwide, the rates of chronic absenteeism (defined as missing 10% or more days of school) have increased markedly (Malkus, 2024). A large body of research has documented the adverse consequences of chronic absenteeism for student development and learning, from school readiness to academic achievement and attainment (e.g., Swiderski et al., 2025). Accordingly, educators and policymakers have paid increasing attention to student attendance over the past decade (Jordan, 2017). Prior studies have evaluated the effects of some specific interventions (Eklund et al., 2022), and education agencies and advocacy organizations have provided guidance for schools on how to improve attendance (e.g., Jordan, 2023).

There is little evidence, however, of what schools are actually doing to improve attendance, and the extent to which their approaches vary across contexts. Only a small number of studies have examined how schools are designing and implementing attendance practices, largely focusing on a single context or a small set of practices (Childs et al., 2022; Childs & Grooms, 2018; Childs & Scanlon, 2022; Diliberti et al., 2024; Lenhoff & Singer, 2025). As a field, we lack a broad assessment of the specific practices that schools are using and systems they are developing to address chronic absenteeism.

This study presents evidence on school attendance strategies in Michigan and Georgia, based on a survey administered to principals in both states. This multi-state dataset allows us to systematically document attendance practices statewide, as well as to identify similarities and differences across policy contexts (i.e., between states) and based on school and local characteristics (i.e., within states). Specifically, we explore the following research questions:

1. What attendance practices and systems are schools using to improve attendance?

2. To what extent do these practices and systems vary between states and by school and community characteristics within states?

We find that schools in both states rely heavily on practices aimed at changing student or parent behavior; make only modest use of practices that seek to remove barriers to attendance; and use relatively few practices focused on improving student experiences in school. We also find very little variation in these emphases across school contexts (e.g., prior chronic absenteeism rate, school grade levels, student demographics, locale). We do, however, highlight a few areas of notable difference between states, which appear to reflect their distinct policy contexts. This study fills a gap in the existing literature by providing a richer understanding of schools' prioritization and use of specific practices and systems for improving attendance. The findings offer a useful starting point to consider how states and districts can shape the adoption and implementation of different practices to improve attendance.

Different Approaches to Improving Attendance

Though there is limited systematic evidence about the prevalence, frequency, or effectiveness of attendance practices, we know from a combination of prior interventions, evaluation studies, and technical guidance about a variety of different practices that schools might use to address chronic absenteeism (Singer, 2025). Attendance practices can be roughly placed into three different categories: a) those aimed at changing the mindsets, behaviors, and dispositions of students or their parents; b) those that focus on improving student experiences in school; and, c) those that seek to identify and remove out-of-school barriers to attendance. While there is considerable overlap in the activities schools engage in within these categories, it is useful to highlight their distinct underlying theories-of-change, as well as their benefits, drawbacks, and tradeoffs. Figure 1 presents a conceptual framework for understanding these practices in terms of

their cost (e.g., time, money, personnel, implementation effort) and effect (i.e., impact on attendance).

[Figure 1]

Changing Student or Parent Behavior

Schools may focus on changing student or parent behavior through information, incentives, and sanctions. For example, schools use various forms of one-way communication methods (e.g., phone calls, newsletters, text messages, letters home) to encourage families to maintain good attendance and to inform parents or students about their attendance (Robinson et al., 2018; Swanson, 2022). Districts might also engage in community-wide communication campaigns to promote the importance of attendance (Lenhoff et al., 2020). In addition, some schools offer specific incentives to students, such as awards or prizes for their attendance (Balu & Ehrlich, 2018). Finally, districts also leverage state truancy policies, from warnings about legal consequences to court referrals for truancy prosecution, to push families to improve their children's attendance (Edwards et al., 2023). The benefit of these types of behavioral interventions is that they are relatively inexpensive and easy-to-implement. Educators have capacity for and experience with communicating with students and parents, creating motivational systems for their classrooms or schools, and applying existing laws and policies. There are, however, several drawback: these practices have only a small impact on attendance, if any (Balu & Ehrlich, 2018; McNeely et al., 2019; Robinson et al., 2018, 2019; Swanson, 2022); they do little to address the underlying barriers to attendance that students face (Lenhoff & Singer, 2025); and they are sometimes part of a deficit-based approach that presumes students or parents are misinformed or unmotivated (Edwards et al., 2023; Lenhoff & Singer, 2025)

Improving Student Experiences in School

Schools may also focus on improving the experience that students have in school to increase attendance rates. Several studies have found a positive association between attendance and school climate, and in particular measures of student belonging and school-family relationships (e.g., Liu & Lee, 2022). Yet, other dimensions of the schooling experience, such as the use of exclusionary discipline, can negatively impact student attendance (Graham et al., 2025; Singer, 2023). School personnel also play an important role in student attendance: through their dispositions, identities, relationships with students, and instructional quality, teachers and principals can impact student attendance (e.g., Bartanen, 2020; Liu & Loeb, 2019). The benefit of focusing on improving the experience of students is that these efforts are central foci for schools and districts, as educators and leaders are already dedicated to providing students with high-quality instruction and a positive school climate. They also have existing organizational systems and resources dedicated to them. The drawback, however, is that the link between these efforts and student attendance is less clear than a new or discrete intervention, creating uncertainty for how exactly schools would tie these elements to attendance.

Removing Barriers to Attendance

Finally, schools may focus on identifying and addressing the barriers to attendance that students and their families face. Districts already provide some resources that can aid families, such as school meals (Kirksey & Gottfried, 2021), school-based transportation (Edwards, 2022), some health services (Allen, 2003), and resources for homeless students (Lenhoff et al., 2023). They can also partner with external organizations (e.g., community-based service providers, regional and state agencies) to provide additional resources and supports for students and their families (Childs & Scanlon, 2022). Schools can organize their efforts to provide these resources to families around casework, such as through home visits (Stemler et al., 2022). They may also adopt

the “community schools” model, integrating external resources organizationally with school operations and physically in the school building (Covelli et al., 2022; Swain et al., 2025). The benefit of providing such resources is that they directly deal with the root causes of chronic absenteeism, and often have a larger impact than behavioral interventions and other school-based efforts. One drawback, however, is that these efforts are much more time- and resource-intensive, and they fall outside of more central domains such as instruction, so schools may have limited capacity to carry them out (Spillane et al., 2022). Thus, while directly addressing the root causes of absenteeism is potentially effective, it is logistically complex, resource-intensive, and often beyond the immediate scope and capacity of schools.

Summary

Based on prior research, we have described three different types of practices that schools might use to improve attendance. Though there may be benefits and drawbacks to each, we have little evidence of how common these types of practices are. Filling this gap in the literature can provide a clearer picture of the state of attendance practice today, and to help guide strategic efforts by policymakers and educators moving forward.

Study Context

The multi-state case study allows us to consider the similarities and differences in school attendance practices both within states (e.g., different locales) and between states (e.g., different policy environments). Michigan and Georgia represent a useful pair of states for this purpose: they are close size in terms of total and school-aged population (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019), but they are located in different regions of the country (the South versus the Midwest) and differ in their social, economic, and policy contexts. For example, while both states feature a similar mix of diverse urban centers and large rural areas, Georgia is much more racially

diverse. In addition, while both states have similar poverty rates, with racially stratified metro areas and economic hardships in both rural and urban contexts, these conditions in Michigan reflect decades of deindustrialization and population stagnation, whereas in Georgia they are the result of rapid population growth, suburban expansion, and uneven development across the state (Boldt & Kassis, 2005; Torres, 2023). Michigan's school system is more fragmented and decentralized, with hundreds of local school districts that align with municipal or micro-regional boundaries, while Georgia's school system is organized by larger county-wide districts (National Center for Education Statistics, 2017).

Michigan and Georgia also differ in terms of policies that influence school attendance practices. In Georgia, the Senate recently passed Georgia's Senate Bill 123 (2025), which prohibits schools from expelling students solely for absenteeism. It further requires districts to establish attendance review teams that analyze root causes, coordinate supports, and develop intervention plans when chronic absence becomes systemic. These teams must review school-level data, engage families, and implement corrective strategies—activities triggered when absenteeism reaches statutory thresholds (e.g., 10% at the district level or 15% at the school level). By contrast, Michigan does not direct schools and districts to adopt specific strategies (Attendance Works, 2025; Education Trust, 2025). The state monitors chronic absenteeism through annual data collection and has incorporated it into its school accountability system. The Michigan Department of Education is developing guidance for schools and districts, but lawmakers do not require the adoption of any specific organizational systems. Notably, Michigan has placed a substantial focus on a related issue of student mental health, from increased school funding to detailed guidance for schools and districts (Kittridge-Farrell et al., 2025). Collecting data from both states helps us

identify the extent to which trends in school attendance practices are state-specific or consistent across contexts.

Data and Methods

This study presents the results of a survey of principals in Michigan and Georgia at the end of the 2024-25 school year. We developed a survey instrument focused on school-level attendance practices and attendance-related systems.[1] To do so, we drew upon survey items and design choices from prior studies of attendance practices (Diliberti et al., 2024; Lenhoff & Singer, 2025; Singer, 2024) and technical documentation of attendance strategies from advocacy organizations (e.g., Jordan, 2023). We piloted the survey with several principals and solicited feedback from state educational leaders, which informed further revisions.

Data Collection

Our survey population included all principals of all K-12 public schools in Michigan and Georgia during the 2024-25 school year.[2] Using publicly available records from state education agencies, we developed rosters that included the name and contact information for the principals of each school in our survey population.[3] We fielded our survey of Michigan principals from March

[1] A version of the survey can be found at [REDACTED FOR PEER REVIEW].

[2] While we included some alternative schools, virtual schools, and special education centers in our initial survey administration, we excluded these schools from our defined study population given the unique student populations and unique dynamics of attendance at those schools. These schools are not counted in the total number of schools in our population or the number of respondents in our sample.

[3] We used the person listed as principal for each school. In cases where a principal was not listed, we searched the internet for school leader names and contact information, relying primarily on official school websites. In a small number of cases, there were duplicate records for the same school leader across multiple schools. The most common cases were principals in charge of a school that is considered a single entity within their district but is listed as multiple separate entities in the official records (e.g., a combined elementary and middle school that are considered separate entities in state records). In these instances, principals were only surveyed once, and the responses were applied to each school associated with the school leader in the record. This approach ensured that we avoided duplicate records and collected data in alignment with the structure of schools in practice. During survey administration, if we received error messages from an email to a school leader—for example, if the email information was incorrect, or if the person listed was no longer in that position—then we conducted additional internet searches or reached out to the school over the phone to acquire the correct contact information and update our roster. In some cases, we simply updated the contact information; and in others, we removed an old school leader (and added the current leader for that school to the roster.

through June 2025, and of Georgia principals from June through August 2025. We used the online survey platform Qualtrics to host our survey, emailing it directly to principals in our sample. We also promoted the survey through other forms of outreach to principals and stakeholders.[4]

Response Rates and Survey Weights

In total, we received 1,524 survey responses—1,143 survey responses in Michigan (41% response rate) and 376 responses in Georgia (17% response rate). Overall, the characteristics of our respondents were similar to (or differed only modestly from) those of non-respondents (see Appendix A for population, respondent, and non-respondent characteristics). We developed inverse probability weights (based on school demographics, schooling levels, school type, locale, prior school year attendance rate, and county fixed effects) to adjust for these observable differences between respondents and non-respondents (Seaman & White, 2013). We applied these survey weights in all analyses.

Data Analysis

For this study, we focus on three sets of survey questions. The first question asked principals to select the top three areas that they prioritized for the 2024-25 school year from a list of eleven options. We used this question to gauge the extent to which principals were prioritizing attendance relative to other important areas of focus. The second set of questions presented principals with lists of discrete attendance practices (29 in total), and the third question presented principals with a list of six different attendance-related organizational system, asking them to indicate those practices or systems that their school used during the 2024-25 school year. We used

[4] In Michigan, we offered multiple incentives for participation: all school leaders who completed the survey received five continuing education credit hours, school leaders received personalized reports comparing their responses to statewide averages, and thirty randomly selected participants received $1,000 grants for school-related expenses during the 2025-26 school year. In Georgia, the first 200 people who completed the survey received a $25 gift card.

these questions to identify the number and type of practices and the organizational systems that principals were implementing related to attendance.

For our analysis, we started by summarizing the responses to these survey questions to examine similarities and differences between the states. In addition to summarizing the item-level results for attendance practices and systems (i.e., whether a school used that practice or system), we constructed composite measures of attendance practices based on the type of practice (see Figure 1). We indicated whether schools used any of these types of practices and counted the number of practices by type, to capture their prevalence; and we measured the share of a school's total practices by type to capture their relative emphasis. These descriptive summaries provide a snapshot of how schools are trying to improve student attendance, highlighting cross-state similarities and differences that might reflect the influence of state-specific contexts.

We then used regression analysis to examine the variation in attendance practices across different contexts within the states. Here, we estimated four different outcome measures: the likelihood that a school leader reported attendance as a "top three" priority in 2024-25 (linear probability model), and the percentage of a school's attendance practices in 2024-25 that focused on changing student or parent behavior, improving student experiences in school, or removing barriers to attendance (ordinary least squares regression). We predicted these outcomes based on a school's prior year (2023-24) chronic absenteeism rate, racial and economic composition of the student body, locale (i.e., urban, suburban, or rural), grade level (i.e., elementary/middle school or high school), school type (i.e., traditional public school or charter school), and state fixed effects. In the models estimating the share of attendance practices by type, we also controlled for the total number of practices reported by the school leader. We standardized each continuous predictor (i.e., mean of 0 and standard deviation of 1) for ease of interpretation. We also used cluster-robust

standard errors. The results highlight the extent to which schools in both states vary in their emphasis on different types of attendance practices (as well as prioritizing attendance in general) based on their context and composition.

Limitations

There are some notable limitations to this research. First, as in all survey-based research, the data reported by survey respondents may have some inaccuracies. For example, there may be sampling bias, if there are systematic and unobserved differences between schools that participated in the study versus those that did not. (This may be especially an issue for our Georgia data, given the lower response rate.) In addition, respondents may have participated with incomplete information or with mistaken recall about their schools' strategies. Second, while our findings provide rich insights into the approach that Georgia and Michigan schools are taking to improve attendance, there are limits to what survey responses can explain. In particular, the survey response about a specific practice or organizational system still lacks important information about what they look like (and how they may vary) in implementation. Relatedly, broader school improvement activities (e.g., improving instructional quality) may also lead to better student attendance, but we do not systematically document these efforts in our survey. Our results should thus be interpreted with those caveats in mind.

Findings

Overall, the attendance practices reported by school leaders in Georgia and Michigan were broadly similar in both scope and emphasis. Principals in both states reported using a wide range of practices, with the greatest emphasis on strategies aimed at changing student and parent behavior. We did find some notable differences that reflect differing policy contexts, including greater use of student mental health and restorative practices in Michigan; and stronger reliance

on formal systems such as MTSS, attendance teams, and early warning systems in Georgia. Our within-state analyses show limited variation in the mix of attendance practices across school contexts, with only modest differences by school level, sector, or prior absenteeism rates.

Attendance Practices in Georgia and Michigan

Our descriptive analysis of the survey data reveals broad similarities in attendance practices between Georgia and Michigan. A larger share of respondents in Georgia (44%) than in Michigan (36%) reported that student attendance was one of their "top three" priorities for the 2024-25 school year, though schools in Georgia (on average) have lower chronic absenteeism rates and higher attendance rates than in Michigan. Overall, the relative rank-order of school leader priorities were similar in both states (Appendix B).

In both states, the large majority of schools used at least one attendance practice (overall and for each type), though more schools in Georgia (31%) than in Michigan (10%) reported using no practices, especially related to improving student experiences. On average, Georgia principals reported using about eleven different practices, compared to about thirteen for Michigan principals. Practices to change student and parent behavior were most common, making up 50% of the share of attendance practices used in Georgia and 46% in Michigan. Across both states, removing barriers to attendance was the second most common, and least common were discrete practices to improve student experiences. Though there are slight differences, principals in Georgia and Michigan largely reported a similar number (and share) of practices by type.

[Table 1 here]

The results for individual practices and systems, however, reveal some notable differences by state. As shown in Figures 2 and 3, the presence of attendance practices is mostly similar in Georgia and Michigan schools, as is the rank-order of those practices by presence. (See Appendix

C for the underlying statistics for these figures.) For student well-being and mental health practices, however, a much larger share of principals in Michigan reported implementing social-emotional learning and restorative practices as well as providing mental health support to students than in Georgia.[5] In addition, a much larger share of Georgia principals reported that they had attendance teams, multi-tiered systems of support, and early warning systems in place at their schools. We found some differences in the use of communication-based strategies, with letters home and phone calls more common in Michigan than Georgia but text messages more common in Georgia than Michigan. Still, the relative use of these and other practices related to changing student and parent behavior (compared to one another and compared to other types of practices) remained similar for both states.

[Figures 2 and 3 here]

Similarly, a higher percentage of schools in Georgia reported using attendance incentives than in Michigan, which might connect to greater reliance on MTSS among respondents in Georgia. Online learning and adjusting individual schedules were reported in a higher percentage of school in Michigan than Georgia, though these practices remain relatively rare overall. A higher proportion of schools in Georgia reported mentors for students than in Michigan. A higher percentage of schools reported using family engagement initiatives and home visits in Georgia than in Michigan.

Variation in Attendance Practices by School Context

Our regression analysis suggests relatively little variation in the emphasis of attendance practices across different school contexts (Table 2). Our first model predicted the probability that a principal selected attendance as one of their top three priorities. Unsurprisingly, the results show

[5] Aligned with these results, a much larger share of Michigan principals (34%) than Georgia principals (14%) selected social, emotional, and mental health as a "top 3" priority for the 2024-25 school year.

that improving attendance is a higher priority in schools with higher chronic absenteeism rates. A one standard deviation increase in a school's prior-year chronic absenteeism rate (approximately 15 percentage points) was associated with an 11pp increase in the probability that the principal identified attendance as a top priority. High school principals were also more likely than elementary and middle school principals to report prioritizing attendance. Other demographic or contextual factors were not statistically significant predictors.

[Table 2 here]

Our subsequent models estimated the share of a school's total attendance practices devoted to each type of practice. These models reveal some variation, but primarily suggest that emphases in attendance practice are largely similar across school contexts. Prior chronic absenteeism rates and student demographics were weakly related to practice type, though absenteeism rates had a very small but statistically significant positive association with practices to remove barriers, but not practically or statistically significant relationship with the share of behavior- or experience-focused practices. Likewise, student demographics were not associated with the relative share of attendance practices by type (other than a very small negative association of the percentage of low-income students and white students with the share of student experience-focused practices). Suburban schools used a slightly lower share of practices related to removing barriers than rural schools, though the differences were small; and no other differences by locale emerged. Charter schools had slightly more of their practices focused on student or parent behavior and a slightly smaller share focused on removing barriers, but this association was practically very small. High schools had a slightly larger share of their practices focused on student experiences and slightly smaller share focused on removing barriers, though this is likely an artifact of the items included

in student experience category (e.g., changing student schedules, offering online learning) that are likely more applicable for high schools than elementary and middle schools.

Finally, each of these models also included controls for the total number of attendance practices, which offers some insight into how the mix of practice types might change as schools increase the number of total practices they use. For practices aimed at changing student or parent behavior, the coefficient on the total number of practices was negative. In contrast, the total number of practices was positively associated with the share of practices focused on improving student experiences and removing barriers. These coefficients suggest that schools with fewer overall practices are somewhat more likely to emphasize changing parent and student behavior, whereas schools with more practices are slightly more likely to increase their focus on improving student experiences or removing barriers to attendance. Still, these associates are practically small: a one standard deviation increase in the number of practices (i.e., about 5 additional practices) is only associated with 5pp smaller share of behavior-focused practices and 2pp larger share experience- and barrier-focused practices. Taken all together, these findings suggest that schools across different demographic and geographic contexts tend to use a similar mix of attendance practices types.

Discussion

This study provides evidence on how schools are addressing attendance in response to the dramatic post-pandemic increase in chronic absenteeism. It contributes to the literature by presenting a relatively comprehensive snapshot of attendance practices in two states, which can inform policymakers and educational leaders as they consider how to best support schools and districts to improve attendance. Attendance is a top priority for many principals across Michigan and Georgia, aligning with recent national evidence that roughly 40% of district leaders identified

attendance as a top challenge during the 2024-25 school year (Diliberti et al., 2025). Schools in Georgia and Michigan reported similar types of attendance practices, suggesting a common set of responses to chronic absenteeism.

There are some notable differences between Michigan and Georgia, which seem to reflect their specific state policy context. Georgia principals more frequently reported using many attendance-related systems, such as attendance teams, MTSS, and early warning systems. The greater prevalence of these systems in Georgia than Michigan is consistent with recent state policies that require these approaches. By contrast, Michigan principals more often reported mental health supports, social-emotional learning, and restorative practices as attendance practices. This reflects the state's recent emphasis on and investment in student mental health and well-being. These findings suggest that state policy can influence how schools respond to absenteeism by shaping which existing systems and resources educators leverage to improve attendance.

Still, similarities in attendance practices both within and between states suggest a degree of isomorphism in attendance practices, with schools gravitating toward a common set of strategies regardless of context (Singer, 2025). This may reinforce a reliance on approaches that are easy-to-implement but insufficient to address many root causes of chronic absenteeism. For example, our finding that only about half of schools have data systems to track reasons for absenteeism further underscores this concern, as the lack of such data may limit schools' ability to align strategies with underlying causes.

The most commonly used practices were communication-based (e.g., phone calls, letters home), likely because they are lower-cost and relatively easy to implement. When implemented well, these strategies can have a meaningful but small positive impact (Robinson et al., 2018), though in some cases, these efforts may function more as symbolic actions that look like schools

are addressing the problem (Singer, 2025). Other strategies like mentorship programs or attendance incentives have limited supporting evidence and may be a drain on time and resources without a strong payoff (Balu & Ehrlich, 2018; Swanson, 2022).

Meanwhile, some of the highest-impact approaches (e.g., family engagement, arranging transportation, or addressing other root causes) were less common, likely because they require cross-sector collaboration, funding, and staffing that many schools simply do not have (Lenhoff & Singer, 2025). Similarly, strategies focused on improving student experiences in school were the least common, perhaps because they are not seen as directly related to improving attendance. Improving school climate may not offer immediate or easily measurable gains, but it forms the basis for student belonging, positive school-family relationships, and engagement, all of which can improve school attendance (Liu & Lee, 2022).

Taken together, these findings suggest a need for greater coherence in school attendance strategies (Spillane et al., 2022). Since schools have adopted a variety of different practices, with little variation across contexts, this raises questions about whether their efforts are well-aligned with existing research evidence and the root causes of absenteeism in different contexts. Further, the emphasis on low-cost communication practices suggests that schools are guided to an extent by what is feasible to adopt and implement with existing organizational capacity, rather than what is most likely to reduce chronic absenteeism. District leaders and policymakers can help schools shift from a broad set of loosely connected practices to more integrated approaches. In particular, schools could benefit from clearer guidance to select effective strategies; and to develop systems for diagnosing the reasons that students are absent and allocating their resources accordingly. In addition, policy efforts to provide additional resources, improve the data infrastructure, and

facilitate cross-sector partnerships may help schools develop the right balance of nudging families, improving school experiences, and removing barriers to attendance.

This multi-state study provides important insight into schools' approaches to improving attendance in the post-pandemic era. Future research can build upon these findings to expand our field's understanding of this growing area of practice. We need more evidence on why schools select different attendance-related practices and systems (e.g., state or district guidance, perceptions of root causes); whether, how and why the implementation of these practices and systems varies between schools (e.g., design, frequency, fidelity); and the impact that these strategies have on student attendance (i.e., how effective they are, for whom, and under what conditions).

References

Allen, G. (2003). The Impact of Elementary School Nurses on Student Attendance. *The Journal of School Nursing*, *19*(4), 225–231. https://doi.org/10.1177/10598405030190040801

Attendance Works. (2025). *State Scan Table 2025*. https://docs.google.com/spreadsheets/d/1g_8N6f9Jw9e38waU2QOBsXykXVWtpETUbzBZQ_r8O30/edit?usp=embed_facebook

Balu, R., & Ehrlich, S. B. (2018). Making Sense out of Incentives: A Framework for Considering the Design, Use, and Implementation of Incentives to Improve Attendance. *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk (JESPAR)*, *23*(1–2), 93–106. https://doi.org/10.1080/10824669.2018.1438898

Bartanen, B. (2020). Principal Quality and Student Attendance. *Educational Researcher*, 0013189X19898702. https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X19898702

Boldt, D., & Kassis, M. M. (2005). *A Historical Perspective of Georgia's Economy*. Fiscal Research Center, Georgia State University.

Childs, J., & Grooms, A. A. (2018). Improving School Attendance through Collaboration: A Catalyst for Community Involvement and Change. *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk (JESPAR)*, *23*(1–2), 122–138. https://doi.org/10.1080/10824669.2018.1439751

Childs, J., Grooms, A., & Mozley, M. P. (2022). Hidden in (Virtual) Plain Sight: A Charter District's Focus on Attendance During COVID-19. *Education and Urban Society*, 00131245211065414. https://doi.org/10.1177/00131245211065414

Childs, J., & Scanlon, C. L. (2022). Coordinating the Mesosystem: An Ecological Approach to Addressing Chronic Absenteeism. *Peabody Journal of Education*, *97*(1), 74–86. https://doi.org/10.1080/0161956X.2022.2026722

Covelli, L., Engberg, J., & Opper, I. M. (2022). Leading Indicators of Long-Term Success in Community Schools: Evidence from New York City. In *EdWorkingPapers.com*. Annenberg Institute at Brown University. https://www.edworkingpapers.com/ai22-669

Diliberti, M. K., Chu, L., Rainey, L. R., DiNicola, S. E., Lake, R. J., & Schwartz, H. L. (2025). *Chronic Absenteeism Still a Struggle in 2024–2025: Selected Findings from the American School District Panel and the American Youth Panel*. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA956-34.html

Diliberti, M. K., Rainey, L. R., Chu, L., & Schwartz, H. L. (2024). *Districts Try with Limited Success to Reduce Chronic Absenteeism: Selected Findings from the Spring 2024 American School District Panel Survey and Interviews*. RAND Corporation. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA956-26.html

Education Trust. (2025). *How Are States Handling Chronic Absenteeism?* Education Trust. https://edtrust.org/rti/chronic-absenteeism/

Edwards, D. S. (2022). Another One Rides the Bus: The Impact of School Transportation on Student Outcomes in Michigan. *Education Finance and Policy*, 1–51. https://doi.org/10.1162/edfp_a_00382

Edwards, E. B., Singer, J., & Lenhoff, S. W. (2023). Anti-Blackness and Attendance Policy Implementation: Evidence From a Midwestern School District. *Educational Researcher*. https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X221079853

Eklund, K., Burns, M. K., Oyen, K., DeMarchena, S., & McCollom, E. M. (2022). Addressing Chronic Absenteeism in Schools: A Meta-Analysis of Evidence-Based Interventions.

School Psychology Review, *51*(1), 95–111. https://doi.org/10.1080/2372966X.2020.1789436

Graham, J., Grooms, A., & Childs, J. (2025). Countering Racialized Logics About Black Students and School Attendance. *Educational Researcher*, *54*(4), 201–212. https://doi.org/10.3102/0013189X251321448

Jordan, P. (2023). *Attendance playbook: Smart strategies for reducing student absenteeism post-pandemic*. FutureEd and Attendance Works.

Jordan, P. W. (2017, May 12). How Did Chronic Absenteeism Become a Thing? *Education Next*. https://www.educationnext.org/how-did-chronic-absenteeism-become-a-thing/

Kirksey, J. J., & Gottfried, M. A. (2021). The Effect of Serving "Breakfast After-the-Bell" Meals on School Absenteeism: Comparing Results From Regression Discontinuity Designs. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 0162373721991572. https://doi.org/10.3102/0162373721991572

Kittridge-Farrell, C., Dillon, C., Robinson, C., Billings, D., Smith, D., Bansen, D., & Rocheleau, D. (2025). *Michigan's Guidance for a Comprehensive School Mental Health System of Supports*. Michigan Department of Education.

Lenhoff, S. W., Edwards, E. B., Claiborne, J., Singer, J., & French, K. R. (2020). A Collaborative Problem-Solving Approach to Improving District Attendance Policy. *Educational Policy*, 0895904820974402. https://doi.org/10.1177/0895904820974402

Lenhoff, S. W., & Singer, J. (2025). *Rethinking Chronic Absenteeism: Why Schools Can't Solve It Alone*. Harvard Education Press. https://hep.gse.harvard.edu/9781682539613/rethinking-chronic-absenteeism/

Lenhoff, S. W., Singer, J., Dhaliwal, T. K., Erb-Downward, J., Blok, J., Miller, W., Burch, B., Brantley, K., & Bertrand, A. (2023). *Detroit Schools Severely Under-Identify Students Experiencing Homelessness and Housing Instability*. Detroit Partnership for Education Equity and Research. https://detroitpeer.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/06/Identification-New-Tables-24.pdf

Liu, J., & Lee, M. (2022). *Beyond chronic absenteeism: The dynamics and disparities of class absences in secondary school* (EdWorkingPaper Nos. 22–562). Annenberg Institute at Brown University. https://edworkingpapers.org/sites/default/files/ai22-562.pdf

Liu, J., & Loeb, S. (2019). Engaging Teachers: Measuring the Impact of Teachers on Student Attendance in Secondary School. *Journal of Human Resources*, 1216-8430R3. https://doi.org/10.3368/jhr.56.2.1216-8430R3

Malkus, N. (2024). *Long COVID for Public Schools: Chronic Absenteeism Before and After the Pandemic*. American Enterprise Institute. https://www.aei.org/research-products/report/long-covid-for-public-schools-chronic-absenteeism-before-and-after-the-pandemic/

McNeely, C. A., Lee, W. F., Rosenbaum, J. E., Alemu, B., & Renner, L. M. (2019). Long-Term Effects of Truancy Diversion on School Attendance: A Quasi-Experimental Study with Linked Administrative Data. *Prevention Science*, *20*(7), 996–1008. https://doi.org/10.1007/s11121-019-01027-z

National Center for Education Statistics. (2017). *Number of operating public schools and districts, student membership, teachers, and pupil/teacher ratio, by state or jurisdiction.* United States Department of Education. https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2018/2018052/tables/table_02.asp

National Center for Education Statistics. (2019). *Estimated total and school-age resident populations, by state: Selected years, 1970 through 2017.* (Digest of Education Statistics). U.S. Department of Education. https://nces.ed.gov/programs/digest/d18/tables/dt18_101.40.asp

Robinson, C. D., Gallus, J., Lee, M. G., & Rogers, T. (2019). The demotivating effect (and unintended message) of awards. *Organizational Behavior and Human Decision Processes*, S0749597818306083. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.obhdp.2019.03.006

Robinson, C. D., Lee, M. G., Dearing, E., & Rogers, T. (2018). Reducing Student Absenteeism in the Early Grades by Targeting Parental Beliefs. *American Educational Research Journal*, *55*(6), 1163–1192. https://doi.org/10.3102/0002831218772274

Seaman, S. R., & White, I. R. (2013). Review of inverse probability weighting for dealing with missing data. *Statistical Methods in Medical Research*, *22*(3), 278–295. https://doi.org/10.1177/0962280210395740

Singer, J. (2023). The Effect of Suspensions on Student Attendance in a High-Absenteeism Urban District. *Urban Education*.

Singer, J. (2024). Attendance Practices in High-Absenteeism Districts. *Educational Policy*. https://doi.org/10.1177/08959048241288504

Singer, J. (2025). Attendance Practices in High-Absenteeism Districts. *Educational Policy*, *39*(6), 1209–1240. https://doi.org/10.1177/08959048241288504

Spillane, J. P., Blaushild, N. L., Neumerski, C. M., Seelig, J. L., & Peurach, D. J. (2022). Striving for Coherence, Struggling With Incoherence: A Comparative Study of Six Educational Systems Organizing for Instruction. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, 01623737221093382. https://doi.org/10.3102/01623737221093382

Stemler, S. E., Werblow, J., Brunner, E. J., Amado, A., Hussey, O., Ross, S., Gillotti, J., Hammond, S., Jiang, S., & Pruscino, I. (2022). *An evaluation of the effectiveness of home visits for re-engaging students who were chronically absent in the era of COVID-19*. Center for Connecticut Education Research Collaboration. https://portal.ct.gov/-/media/CCERC/Reports/CCERC-Exec-Summary-LEAP_FINAL.pdf

Swain, W., Leung-Gagné, M., Maier, A., & Rubinstein, C. (2025). *Community schools impact on student outcomes: Evidence from California*. Learning Policy Institute. https://doi.org/10.54300/541.498

Swanson, E. (2022). *Improving Rural Attendance: Results from Six Pilots in NCRERN's New York and Ohio Rural Research Network*. National Center for Rural Education Research Networks. https://ncrern.provingground.cepr.harvard.edu/sites/hwpi.harvard.edu/files/ncrern/files/ncrern_attendance_results.pdf?m=1667393939

Swiderski, T., Fuller, S. C., & Bastian, K. C. (2025). The Relationship Between Student Attendance and Achievement, Pre- and Post-COVID. *AERA Open*, *11*, 23328584251371041. https://doi.org/10.1177/23328584251371041

Torres, M. (2023). *Race, Place, and the Politics of Urban Austerity in Michigan, 1970s-2010s* [Harvard University]. https://nrs.harvard.edu/URN-3:HUL.INSTREPOS:37375847

Tables and Figures

Table 1

School Attendance Practices and Systems in Georgia and Michigan, 2024-25

	Georgia	Michigan
Student Attendance		
Prior Chronic Absenteeism Rate	0.21	0.28***
	(0.12)	(0.17)
Prior Average Daily Attendance	0.93	0.91***
	(0.03)	(0.05)
Attendance as a "Top 3" Priority	0.44	0.36***
Any Attendance Practices		
All Types	0.83	1.00***
Parent/Student Behavior	0.83	1.00***
Student Experience	0.69	0.90***
Removing Barriers	0.82	0.97***
Number of Attendance Practices		
All Types	11.45	12.60***
	(6.78)	(4.17)
Parent/Student Behavior	5.51	5.68
	(3.15)	(1.92)
Student Experience	1.72	2.27***
	(1.67)	(1.50)
Removing Barriers	4.22	4.65***
	(2.72)	(2.01)
Share of Attendance Practices		
Parent/Student Behavior	0.50	0.46***
	(0.12)	(0.09)
Student Experience	0.14	0.17***
	(0.09)	(0.10)
Removing Barriers	0.36	0.36
	(0.10)	(0.12)

Note: Standard deviations (in parentheses) are reported for continuous variables only. *$p<0.05$, **$p<0.01$, ***$p<0.001$

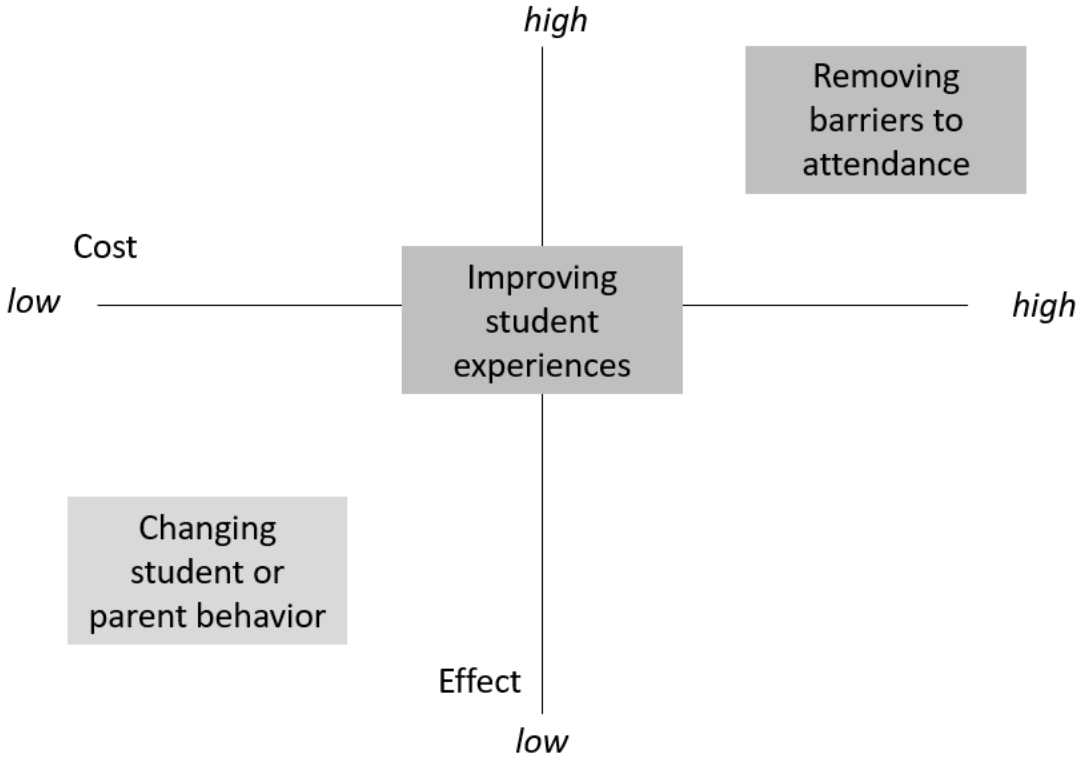
Table 2

Predicting Attendance Focus and Practice Type in Georgia and Michigan, 2024-25

	Attendance as "Top" Focus	Pct. Parent/ Student Behavior Practices	Pct. Student Experience Practices	Pct. Removing Barrier Practices
N Attendance Practices	-	-0.05***	0.03***	0.02***
		(0.01)	(0.00)	(0.00)
Prior Chronic Absenteeism Rate	0.11***	0.00	-0.01	0.01*
	(0.02)	(0.00)	(0.01)	(0.00)
Pct. Low-Income	0.02	0.00	-0.01*	0.01
	(0.03)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)
Pct. White	-0.02	0.00	-0.01**	0.01
	(0.03)	(0.01)	(0.00)	(0.01)
Locale (ref = Rural)				
Urban	-0.04	0.01	-0.01	0.00
	(0.06)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)
Suburban	-0.07	0.02	0.00	-0.02*
	(0.05)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)
Grade Level (ref = Elementary/Middle)				
High School	0.10**	-0.01	0.04***	-0.03***
	(0.04)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)
School Type (ref = TPS)				
Charter	-0.00	0.02*	0.00	-0.02*
	(0.05)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)
State (ref = GA)				
Michigan	-0.09*	-0.05***	0.04***	0.01
	(0.04)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)
Constant	0.45***	0.51***	0.13***	0.37***
	(0.05)	(0.01)	(0.01)	(0.01)
N	1,475	1,452	1,452	1,452
R^2	0.10	0.15	0.13	0.08

Note: four continuous variables (N Attendance Practices, Chronic Absenteeism Rate, Pct. Low Income, and Pct. White) are standardized by state for ease of interpretation. Coefficients are reported with cluster-robust standard errors (in parentheses). *$p<0.05$, **$p<0.01$, ***$p<0.001$

Figure 1
Conceptual Framework for School Attendance Practices



Note: This framework is guided by a close review of existing research on attendance interventions, considering costs, effectiveness, and implementation realities. It is not based on a formal cost-benefit analysis.

Figure 2

School Attendance Practices by Type in Georgia and Michigan, 2024-25

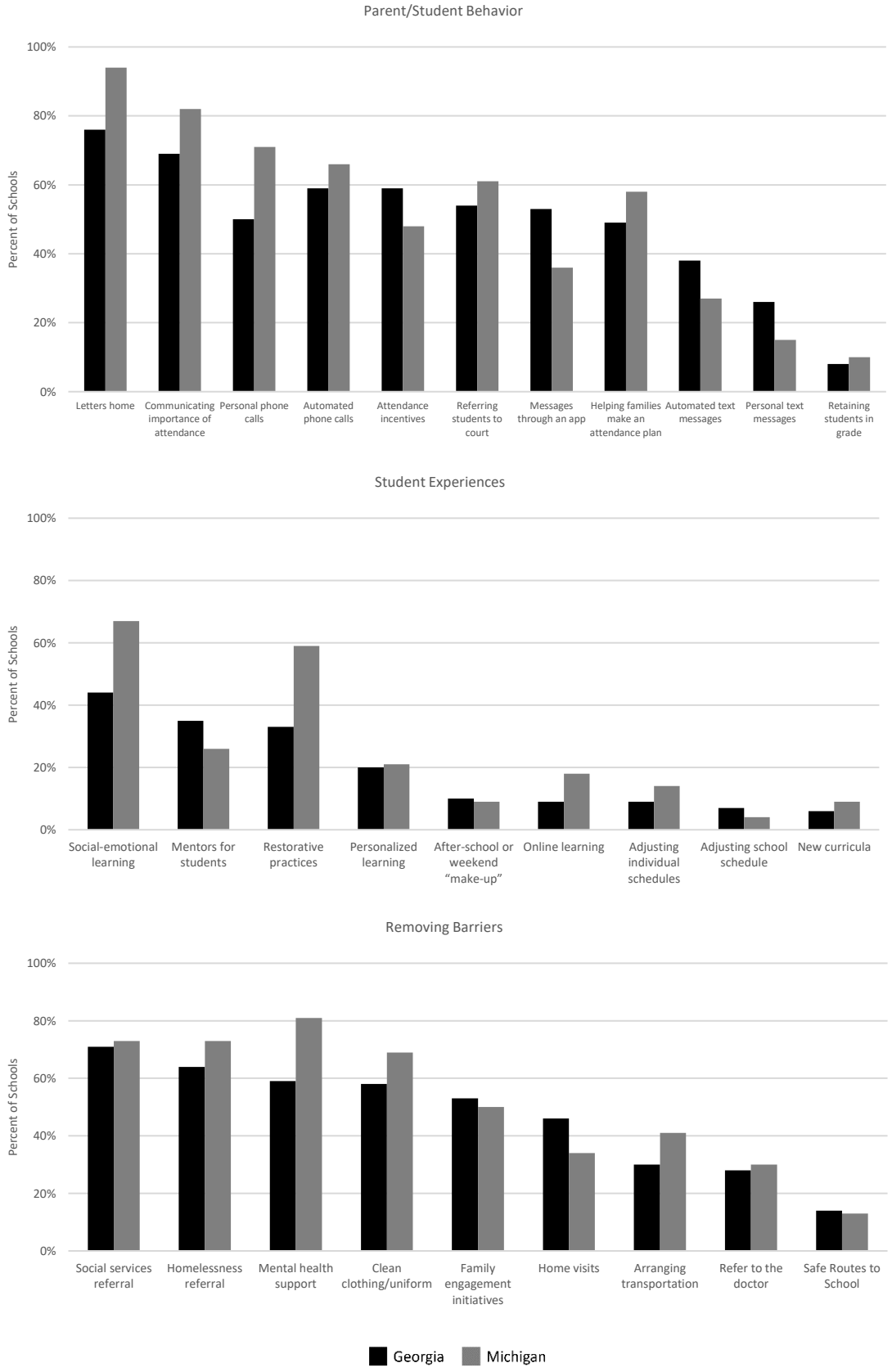
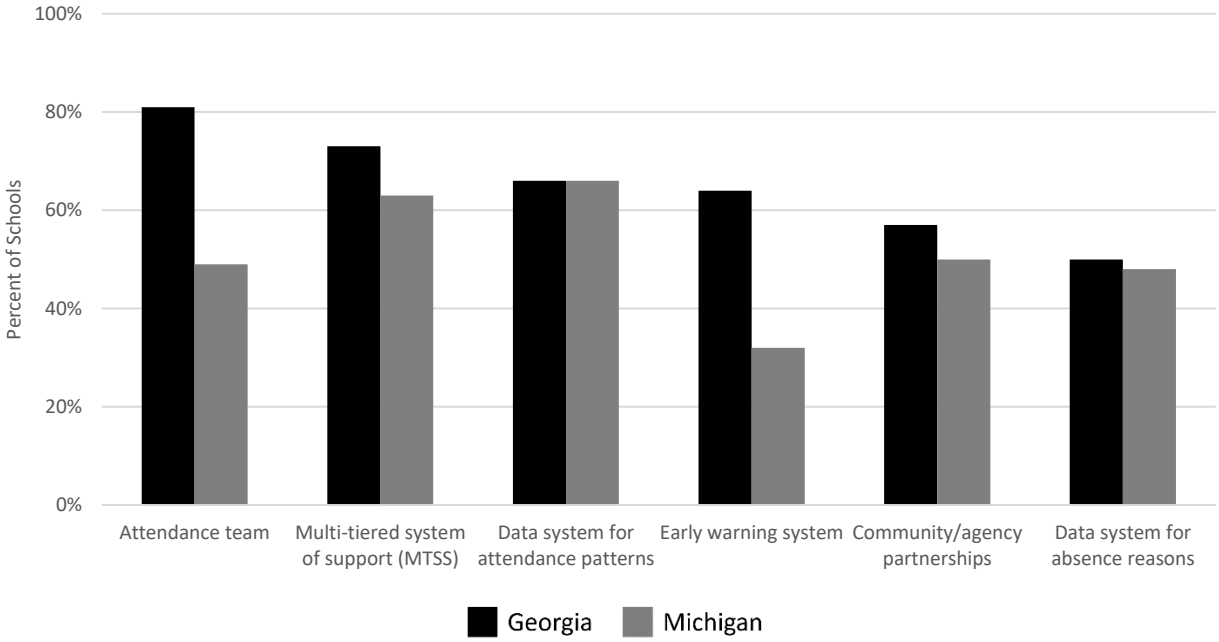


Figure 3

School Attendance Systems in Georgia and Michigan, 2024-25



Appendix A

Table A1

Survey Population and Respondents for Georgia

School Characteristics	Survey Population (N=2,199)	Unweighted Respondents (N=376)	Weighted Respondents (N=376)
Prior Year Attendance			
Attendance Rate	0.93	0.93	0.93
Chronic Absenteeism Rate	0.21	0.21	0.21
Grade Levels			
K-8	0.79	0.78	0.83
High School	0.19	0.20	0.16
Locale			
Urban	0.18	0.19	0.19
Suburban	0.39	0.24	0.39
Rural or Town	0.43	0.57	0.42
Demographics			
Pct. Low Income	0.69	0.71	0.68
Pct. Black	0.39	0.38	0.40
Pct. Asian	0.04	0.03	0.03
Pct. Hispanic	0.17	0.16	0.17
Pct. White	0.35	0.39	0.34
Pct. Other Race	0.05	0.05	0.05
Pct. Special Education	0.14	0.13	0.13
Pct. English Language Learner	0.08	0.07	0.08
Pct. Female			
School Sector			
Traditional Public School	0.96	0.95	0.95
Charter School	0.04	0.05	0.05

*$p<0.05$, **$p<0.01$, ***$p<0.001$

Table A2
Survey Respondents and Non-Respondents for Georgia

School Characteristics	Respondents (N=376)	Non-Respondents (N=1,743)
Prior Year Attendance		
Attendance Rate	0.93	0.93
Chronic Absenteeism Rate	0.21	0.21
Grade Levels		
K-8	0.78	0.79
High School	0.20	0.19
Locale		
Urban	0.19	0.18
Suburban	0.24	0.42***
Rural or Town	0.57	0.40***
Demographics		
Pct. Low Income	0.71	0.68 **
Pct. Black	0.38	0.39
Pct. Asian	0.02	0.04***
Pct. Hispanic	0.16	0.18**
Pct. White	0.39	0.34***
Pct. Other Race	0.05	0.05
Pct. Special Education	0.13	0.14
Pct. English Language Learner	0.07	0.08
School Sector		
Traditional Public School	0.95	0.96
Charter School	0.05	0.04

**p<0.05, **p<0.01, ***p<0.001*

Table A3
Survey Population and Respondents for Michigan

School Characteristics	Survey Population (N=2,768)	Unweighted Respondents (N=1,143)	Weighted Respondents (N=1,143)
Prior Year Attendance			
Chronic Absenteeism Rate	0.91	0.91	0.91
Attendance Rate	0.28	0.29	0.28
Grade Levels	0.79	0.74	0.78
K-8	0.21	0.26	0.22
High School			
Locale			
Urban	0.21	0.19	0.21
Suburban	0.38	0.35	0.38
Rural or Town	0.41	0.46	0.41
Demographics			
Pct. Low Income	0.59	0.61	0.59
Pct. Black	0.18	0.18	0.18
Pct. Asian	0.03	0.02	0.03
Pct. Hispanic	0.09	0.09	0.09
Pct. White	0.64	0.64	0.64
Pct. Other Race	0.06	0.06	0.06
Pct. Special Education	0.16	0.16	0.16
Pct. English Language Learner	0.07	0.06	0.07
Pct. Female	0.49	0.49	0.49
School Sector	0.89	0.90	0.89
Traditional Public School	0.11	0.10	0.11
Charter School	0.89	0.90	0.89

*$p<0.05$, **$p<0.01$, ***$p<0.001$

Table A4

Survey Respondents and Non-Respondents for Michigan

School Characteristics	Respondents (N=1,143)	Non-Respondents (N=1,625)
Prior Year Attendance		
Chronic Absenteeism Rate	0.908	0.913**
Attendance Rate	0.29	0.27***
Grade Levels		
K-8	0.74	0.82***
High School	0.26	0.18***
Locale		
Urban	0.19	0.23***
Suburban	0.35	0.40***
Rural or Town	0.46	0.37***
Demographics		
Pct. Low Income	0.61	0.57***
Pct. Black	0.18	0.18
Pct. Asian	0.02	0.04***
Pct. Hispanic	0.09	0.09
Pct. White	0.64	0.64
Pct. Other Race	0.06	0.06
Pct. Special Education	0.16	0.16
Pct. English Language Learner	0.06	0.08***
Pct. Female	0.49	0.49
School Sector		
Traditional Public School	0.90	0.89
Charter School	0.10	0.11

*$p<0.05$, **$p<0.01$, ***$p<0.001$

Appendix B

Table B1
School Leaders' "Top 3" Priorities for 2024-25 by State

Item	Pct. of Georgia Respondents	Pct. of Michigan Respondents
Curriculum and instruction	0.56	0.40***
Data use for instruction, interventions, and supports	0.49	0.38***
Attendance and chronic absenteeism	0.45	0.36***
School culture and climate	0.34	0.48***
Academic interventions	0.29	0.28
Student behavior	0.27	0.37***
Teacher professional development	0.22	0.13***
Social, emotional, and mental health	0.14	0.34***
Family/community engagement	0.13	0.13
Teacher retention and recruitment	0.09	0.08
Effective budgeting and resource allocation	0.02	0.04*

*$p<0.05$, **$p<0.01$, ***$p<0.001$

Appendix C

Table C1

School Attendance Practices and Systems in Georgia and Michigan, 2024-25

	Georgia (N=366)	Michigan (N=1,143)
Changing Student or Parent Behavior		
Letters home	0.76	0.94***
Communicating importance of attendance	0.69	0.82***
Personal phone calls	0.50	0.71***
Automated phone calls	0.59	0.66*
Attendance incentives	0.59	0.48***
Referring students to court	0.54	0.61**
Messages through an app	0.53	0.36***
Helping families make an attendance plan	0.49	0.58***
Automated text messages	0.38	0.27***
Personal text messages	0.26	0.15***
Retaining students in grade	0.08	0.10
Improving Student Experiences in School		
Social-emotional learning	0.44	0.67***
Mentors for students	0.35	0.26***
Restorative practices	0.33	0.59***
Personalized learning	0.20	0.21
After-school or weekend “make-up”	0.10	0.09
Online learning	0.09	0.18***
Adjusting individual schedules	0.09	0.14***
Adjusting school schedule	0.07	0.04
New curricula	0.06	0.09
Removing Barriers to Attendance		
Social services referral	0.71	0.73
Homelessness referral	0.64	0.73***
Mental health support	0.59	0.81***
Clean clothing/uniform	0.58	0.69***
Family engagement initiatives	0.53	0.50
Home visits	0.46	0.34***
Arranging transportation	0.30	0.41***
Refer to the doctor	0.28	0.30
Safe Routes to School	0.14	0.13
Attendance-Related Systems		
Attendance team	0.81	0.49***
Multi-tiered system of support (MTSS)	0.73	0.63***
Data system for attendance patterns	0.66	0.66
Early warning system	0.64	0.32***
Community/agency partnerships	0.57	0.50*
Data system for absence reasons	0.50	0.48

*$p<0.05$, **$p<0.01$, ***$p<0.001$