CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM- HOW TO ADDRESS SCHOOL AVOIDANCE

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DISCLOSURES

I have none

WHAT CAN WE DO BETTER?

GOALS FOR TODAYS TALK

1

Understand the causes of chronic absenteeism

2

Recognize early signs of school avoidance

3

Learn strategies to improve school avoidance

PBS NEWS HOUR

Menu Notifications

By – Gabrielle Hays

Leave your feedback

Share

Chronic absenteeism is up across the country. School leaders are trying to address why

Nation Jan 17, 2024 5:23 PM EDT

Rick Hess Straight Up

Education policy maven Rick Hess of the American Enterprise Institute think tank offers straight talk on matters of policy, politics, research, and reform. Read more from this blog.

STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT OPINION

Chronic Absenteeism Could Be the Biggest Problem Facing Schools Right Now

Research shows the rising levels of pandemic absenteeism aren't going down fast enough

By Rick Hess — February 21, 2024 5 min read

Vox

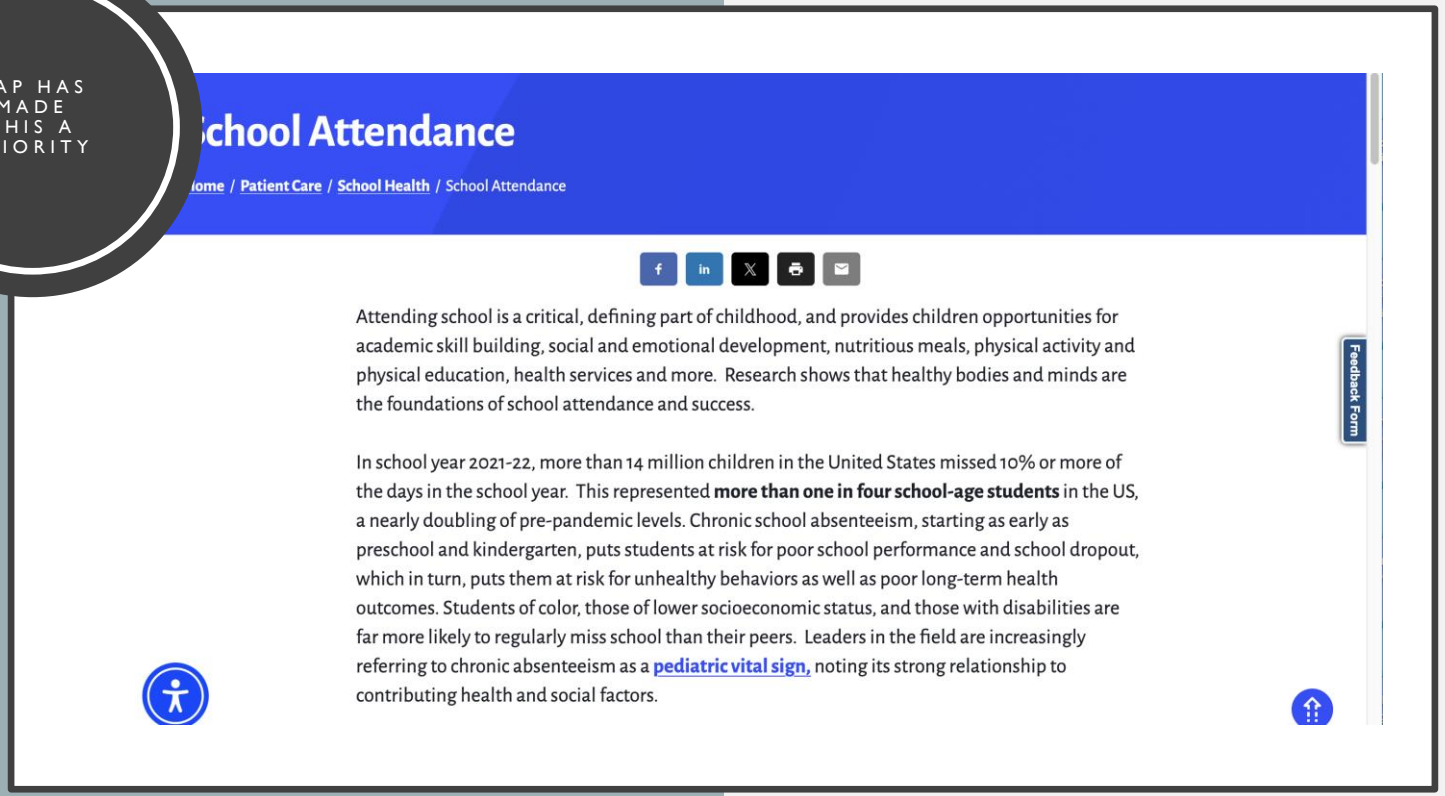
EDUCATION

Why so many kids are still missing school

What it means to be “chronically absent” — and why it matters.

By Fabiola Cineas | Jan 9, 2024, 6:30am EST

AAP HAS MADE THIS A PRIORITY



School Attendance

Home / Patient Care / School Health / School Attendance

Attending school is a critical, defining part of childhood, and provides children opportunities for academic skill building, social and emotional development, nutritious meals, physical activity and physical education, health services and more. Research shows that healthy bodies and minds are the foundations of school attendance and success.

In school year 2021-22, more than 14 million children in the United States missed 10% or more of the days in the school year. This represented **more than one in four school-age students** in the US, a nearly doubling of pre-pandemic levels. Chronic school absenteeism, starting as early as preschool and kindergarten, puts students at risk for poor school performance and school dropout, which in turn, puts them at risk for unhealthy behaviors as well as poor long-term health outcomes. Students of color, those of lower socioeconomic status, and those with disabilities are far more likely to regularly miss school than their peers. Leaders in the field are increasingly referring to chronic absenteeism as a **pediatric vital sign,** noting its strong relationship to contributing health and social factors.

Feedback Form

CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM- DEFINITION

Missing 10% of School Days (18 days out of 180 day school year)

Using 2 days per months or 10% makes it easier to track over the course of the year

Encompasses students who miss for excused and unexcused reasons (truancy)

CAUSES OF CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM

01

Cannot attend because of social determinant of health (illness, family responsibility, housing instability, etc..)

02

Will not attend because of safety concerns, HIB concerns, or Anxiety

03

Choose to not attend because of perceived lack of value (truancy)

SCHOOL HEALTH DICHOTOMY

Stay Home Longer- Don't Get Anyone Sick

- Most upper respiratory infections last 7-10 days
- Can't return without a medical note
- NJ School Exclusion List

Come Back Sooner- You're Missing Too Much School

- Parent or student feels as if they are missing work
- Want to participate in Extracurricular activities
- Warning letters sent to families

DOES CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM MATTER?

Better predictor than grades for school failure

Associated with other health risk behaviors- smoking, substance use, risky sexual behavior

Associated with Juvenile Delinquency

POLICY STATEMENT Organizational Principles to Guide and Define the Child Health Care System and/or Improve the Health of all Children

American Academy of Pediatrics

DEDICATED TO THE HEALTH OF ALL CHILDREN™

The Link Between School Attendance and Good Health

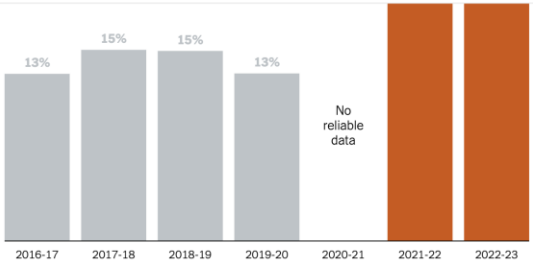
Mandy A. Allison, MD, MSPH, FAAP,[a] Elliott Attisha, DO, FAAP,[b] COUNCIL ON SCHOOL HEALTH

PEDIATRICS Volume 143, number 2, February 2019:e20183648

DID COVID MAKE IT WORSE?

- Many students who struggled with Social Anxiety felt relief with virtual schooling

The New York Times



Source: Nat Malkus, American Enterprise Institute. Chronic absenteeism is defined as missing 10 percent of a school year.

Why School Absences Have 'Exploded' Almost Everywhere

The pandemic changed families' lives and the culture of education: "Our relationship with school became optional."

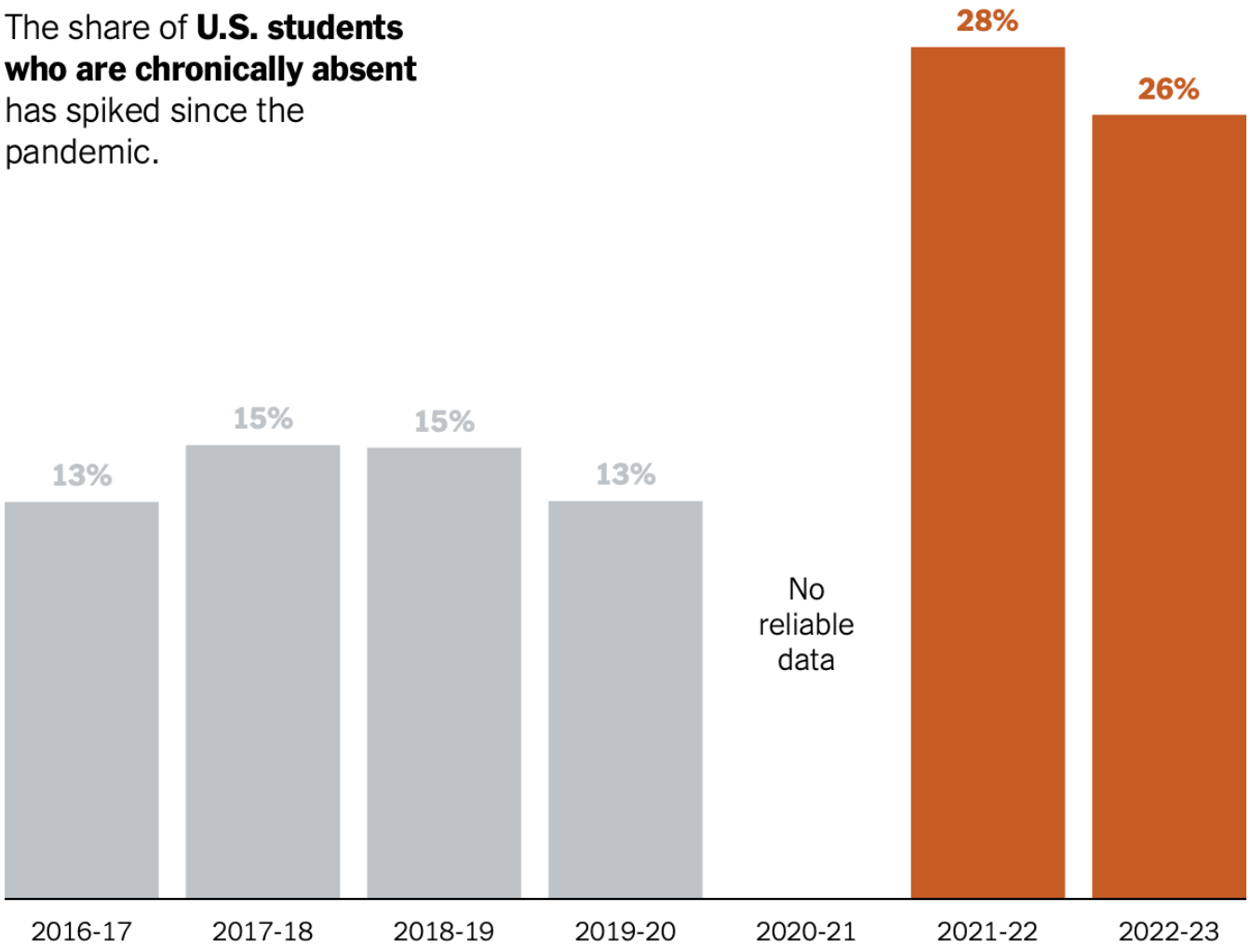
Share full article 2.3K

By Sarah Mervosh and Francesca Paris

Sarah Mervosh reports on K-12 education, and Francesca Paris is a data reporter.

March 29, 2024

The share of **U.S. students who are chronically absent** has spiked since the pandemic.



Source: Nat Malkus, American Enterprise Institute. Chronic absenteeism is defined as missing 10 percent of

SCHOOL AVOIDANCE - DEFINITION

Avoids going to school for extended period time

Consistently arrives late or leaves school early

SCHOOL AVOIDANCE DUE TO ANXIETY- WHY RECOGNIZING THIS IS IMPORTANT

Mental Health Issues can often go unnoticed

Somatic symptoms and chronic absenteeism

Can be signs of underlying mental health issues

Affords opportunity to guide patients towards appropriate treatments

HOW DOES IT DEVELOP?

- Can often start for benign reasons
- Student could be out for medical illness, learning difference, injury, life event
- Develops difficulty going back
- Home becomes a place of comfort

THE STORY OF CHARLIE

INITIAL INJURY

17 yo male currently, Senior in high school

Concussion/cervical spine injury at age 15 in football

Hospitalized in ICU with prolonged recovery

Ultimately fully recovered

Was initially out of school for 5 weeks

SCHOOL ABSCENCES START TO PILE UP

- Has some reluctance going to school
- Parents allowing him to stay home- "don't want to stress him"
- School allows the excused absences and doesn't engage much with the family given the nature of the injury
- Over time, school officials notice Charlie outside of school hours hanging out with his friends

HOW MUCH TIME DID CHARLIE MISS?

- **School Year 2022-23**
- Charlie had 58 absences. 53/58 were recorded as "excused"
- Charlie had 34 tardies. 33/34 were recorded as "excused"

- **School Year 2023-24**
- Charlie has 62 absences. 59/62 are recorded as "excused"
- Charlie has 15 tardies. 0/15 are recorded as "excused"
- Charlie has been inconsistent accessing the scheduled H.I. in SY 2023-24

- Charlie was offered counseling support through a school-based counseling program but did not access it.

WHAT'S REALLY GOING ON WITH CHARLIE?

THINK OF THIS UNDER THE PRISM OF ANXIETY

- Attending school causes an increase in emotional distress (anxiety and/or depression)
- Student often not able to communicate or recognize what causes them the discomfort
- Parents are aware of and want student to feel better so allow them to stay home
- Child feels better when staying home

WHAT CAUSES SCHOOL AVOIDANCE?

POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE REINFORCERS

Negative Reinforcers:

Avoid Discomfort by Staying Out of School

- Avoid social fears, academic stress, family separation, avoid getting sick

Positive Reinforcers:

Student Gain something by Staying Home

- Preferred activities- screens/fun activities, increased attention from family

TRIGGERS FOR ANXIETY AT SCHOOL

- Academic Pressure/Grades
- Social Anxiety- talking to peers (or teachers)
- Bullying/being teased
- Separation Anxiety from parents
- Using a public bathroom
- Talking/Presenting in class
- Fears of getting sick
- Eating in public
- Overstimulation from loud hallways
- Participating in gym/swimming

SCHOOL AVOIDANCE- URGENCY FOR ADDRESSING IT EARLY

The earlier it is addressed the better

The longer it continues, the harder it becomes to get the student back to school

WHAT CAN SCHOOLS DO BETTER? A PEDIATRICIAN'S VIEW

EARLIER RECOGNITION

USE THE HOME INSTRUCTION PROCESS TO YOUR ADVANTAGE

IMPROVE COMMUNICATION AND COLLABORATION WITH **FAMILY**

IMPROVE COMMUNICATION AND COLLABORATION WITH **PHYSICIANS**

#1: *EARLIER RECOGNITION*

ATTENDANCE OFFICE IS OFTEN FRONT LINE

NURSES RECOGNIZE FREQUENT FLYERS

PHYSICIANS WRITE NOTES FOR EXCUSED ABSENCES

ALL OPPORTUNITIES FOR IMPROVED COMMUNICATION

NURSE CAN TOUCH BASE AND ESTABLISH RAPPORT

EDUCATE FAMILY

WARNING SIGNS FOR SCHOOL NURSES

- Frequent tardiness or absences
- Absences on ”significant” days- tests, field days, outings
- Frequent trips to nurse’s office
- Often start after breaks or extended absences

HOME INSTRUCTION

Criteria- > 10 consecutive school days or >20 cumulative school days

School physician must approve

Home Instruction request must come from student's physician

#2- *USING THE HOME INSTRUCTION PROCESS TO HELP*

Communicate Early

Both the **Benefits** and **Limitations** of HI

Ability of school to accommodate Modified Days

Importance of Early return to school to avoid school anxiety

Request must come from "the student's physician"

Can be their pediatrician, specialist or psychiatrist

Can use initial form for physician to sign

Can consider requiring psychiatrist to sign form

HOME INSTRUCTION FORM

Use form to communicate appropriate information to student's physician

- Role of HI
- HI does not adequately replace in person schooling
- Include the amount of absences
- Remind physician that the school's goal is to return the student to school as safely as possible
- Educate physician that school can work with parents and create modified day (not all or none)

Require Diagnosis and detailed Treatment Plan

Approve for specific amount of time (usually 30 days)

Require reassessment at 30 days

CASSEROLE PROBLEM

If there's an allergic reaction, you have to dig deeper into the ingredients

GET TO THE ROUTE CAUSE

Multiple things can trigger anxiety about school

Much easier to address when you understand what they are

#3- *IMPROVE COMMUNICATION WITH THE FAMILY AND STUDENT*

Before Initiating Home Instruction and then Frequently Throughout Process

Discuss School Avoidance and concerns that it gets worse the longer the student is out

For older children- consider giving them a self assessment

What worries or scares you at school?

What do you do on days you go to school? Days you do not attend?

Why do you not want to go?

Describe your morning and bed time routines

IMPROVED COLLABORATION WITH FAMILIES

Trusted Resource	Negative Reinforcer	Positive Reinforcers	Make Home Less Comfortable	Re-entry	Success
Have trusted school source get on phone with family	Find out about negative reinforcers: • What makes school difficult? Get teacher and parent opinions as well	Find out about positive reinforcers • What do they like about being home? Sleep in. Lots of screen time. No stress. No social pressure. Extra attention	• Remove positive reinforcers • Usually screens, internet access	Make a plan for gradual Re-entry	Create positive Reinforcers at school

SAMPLE HOME INSTRUCTION LETTER FOR PARENTS

Information Regarding Home Instruction for Parents

Dear Parents:

Per NJAC 6A:16-10.1 Home instruction can be provided to a student due to a temporary or chronic health condition. Home instruction can be requested if the projected need to be out of school is more than 10 consecutive school days or 20 cumulative school days during a school year. The request must be in writing from the student's physician. The request must include the diagnosis, rationale for home instruction, and expected duration. The school physician may request more information if needed in order to make a determination.

Please be aware that home instruction is not an ideal replacement for in person schooling and the mutual goal should be to return the child to school as quickly as medically possible so they may continue their education and social and emotional learning.

Occasionally, students can develop school avoidance. It can happen for many reasons and often starts out innocently once a child is out of school for a prolonged time for a legitimate reason. Returning to school can be stressful, and the student feels better staying out of school; however, by keeping them out of school, the return to school fears only grows.

The school can often help in these situations. If a student needs to be out on home instruction and there is a concern about school avoidance, the school and the family should meet to discuss strategies. The discussion can include what is causing the child distress by being in school and what they gain by staying home. A plan can then be created by the team to try and return the student to school.

The plan could include:

- Removing positive reinforces at home -"making home less comfortable"
- Creating positive reinforcement for being in school
- Plan for gradual school re-entry. This can start with being in school for a small amount of time every day

Should school avoidance occur, parents can and should work with their medical home and child's pediatrician to help determine if there is a need for other services, such as behavioral therapies.

Please remember we are here to educate and help your child. We will do our best to provide home instruction per regulations when warranted, but we also want to work with you to help prevent school avoidance in your child.

INFO FOR HOME INSTRUCTION FOR PARENTS

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INFO FOR HOME INSTRUCTION FOR PARENTS

The school can often help in these situations. If a student needs to be out on home instruction and there is a concern about school avoidance (e.g., anxiety might interfere with getting back to class), the school and the family should meet to discuss strategies. The discussion can include what is causing the child distress by being in school and what they gain by staying home. A plan can then be created by the team to try and return the student to school.

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PROVIDE SUGGESTIONS FOR PARENTS

- Validate student's feelings about school anxiety
  - "It's ok to feel nervous"
- Remind them it's ok to make mistakes and they are resilient
- Establish consistency in routines
- Practice relaxation techniques- breathing, mindfulness, etc…
- Collaborate with school personnel and get professional help if needed

#4: *IMPROVED COLLABORATION WITH PHYSICIANS*

Many are unaware or do not recognize school avoidance as a sign of social anxiety

Parents often do not disclose full story to the physician

Physicians can be unaware of amount of absences

Are often unaware of limitations of Home Instruction

FROM THE AAP

How Can Pediatricians Make School Attendance a Priority?

Pediatricians can address school attendance in their office-based practices and communities and/or states or nationally as advocates. Some important office-based strategies include (complete list found in the **AAP Policy Statement**):

- Routinely ask at preventive care visits and sick visits about the number of absences a student has experienced
- Praise patients and caregivers when patients are attending school
- Support parents in addressing barriers to attendance
- Assist families in documenting and interpreting their children's medical needs or disability for an individualized education program or 504 plan
- Encourage families to share their concerns about their children's health with their school nurse
- Place a focus on prevention measures to stay healthy and in school, including good nutrition, adequate sleep and physical activity, proper hygiene, etc
- Provide firm guidance on when a child should stay home sick and how to avoid absences from minor illness or anxiety
- Develop relationships with school personnel, including school nurses and mental health clinicians, to foster care coordination and data-sharing opportunities

SUGGESTIONS TO IMPROVE COLLABORATION WITH PHYSICIANS

Create a standardized form for H.I. that includes amount of absences as well as information about limitations of H.I. and importance of early school return

Require a diagnosis and a detailed treatment plan

School physician can determine H.I. to be incomplete and request more information before approving H.I.

School can request that school physician include relevant information in school excusal note, such as awareness of the amount of days absent

School physician can call student's physician to discuss

HOME INSTRUCTION > 30 DAYS

- Have administration discuss modified days. Goal is to get student back in school before school avoidance worsens
- Make sure physician knows how many days missed and how many eligible days
- Also include how often the student is actually utilizing H.I
- Consider requiring psychiatry evaluation for approval of H.I. if not already done
- Inquire about plan of care- is it working?
- If not improving, recommend escalation of care
- Still only approve for 30 days at a time

HOME INSTRUCTION > 60 DAYS

- Refer to Child Study Team per NJ Code
- Have administration discuss modified days. Goal is to get student back in school before school avoidance worsens
- Consider requiring psychiatry evaluation for approval of H.I. if not already done
- Inquire about plan of care
- If not improving, recommend escalation of care
- Still only approve for 30 days at a time

CREATE A SCHOOL RE-ENTRY PLAN

FOLLOW SCHOOL SCHEDULE AT HOME (WAKE UP TIME, STRUCTURE)

DRIVE TO SCHOOL

WALK INTO BUILDING, MEET WITH TEACHER

ENTER SCHOOL AND DO ASYNCHRONOUS WORK IN LIBRARY/CLASSROOM

ATTEND 1-2 PREFERRED CLASSES

ATTEND 3-4 PREFERRED CLASSES

ATTEND FULL DAY WITH BREAKS

FULL RETURN TO SCHOOL

MODIFICATIONS TO SUGGEST

Schedule modifications

- Arrival and Leave time
- Drop a class

Assignment Modifications

- Waive/modify assignements
- Extended time

In class Modificaitons

- Preferred seat
- Leave class early if hallway traffic a stressor
- Ability to see counselor as needed

OUTSIDE RESOURCES

- Local Therapists and Psychiatrists
- NJ PPC
- IOP Programs
- Virtual IOP Programs- Instride Health

ARE THERE OTHER POLICIES THAT SCHOOL CAN ENACT?

Healthy School Start Times-

shown to improve attendance and decrease tardiness

BACK TO CHARLIE- WHAT CAN WE HAVE DONE BETTER?

Earlier Recognition

Higher level of suspicion after hospitalization

Use the Home Instruction process to your advantage

Family physician unaware of amount of abscenses

No treatment plan, just diagnosis of anxiety

Improve Communication and Collaboration with Family

Parents unaware of the concept of School Avoidance

Did not know how else to help Charlie

Did not know there were options for Modified Days

Improve Communication and Collaboration with Physicians

Family physician unaware about the limitations of HI

Were told by parents that school was ok with this

Didn't know where/how to escalate to get Charlie more help

SUMMARY FOR SCHOOL NURSES

1. Work with attendance office to identify students at risk
2. Communicate early with families
3. Educate about risks of school avoidance
4. Work with administration to modify Home Instruction forms
5. Request more detailed info after 30 and 60 days

SUMMARY FOR PEDIATRICIANS

Familiarize yourself with school regulations about HI/school avoidance

Inquire about school absences- ***remember- 2 days per month on average = chronic absenteeism***

Collaborate with school nurses

Don't write notes to excuse students if you are not comfortable

SUMMARY FOR EVERYONE

- Chronic Absenteeism is a significant education concern
- Use Attendance as a "Vital Sign"
- School Avoidance should be addressed as early as possible
- Communication and Collaboration between administration, school nurses, the student's family and the student's physician are imperative