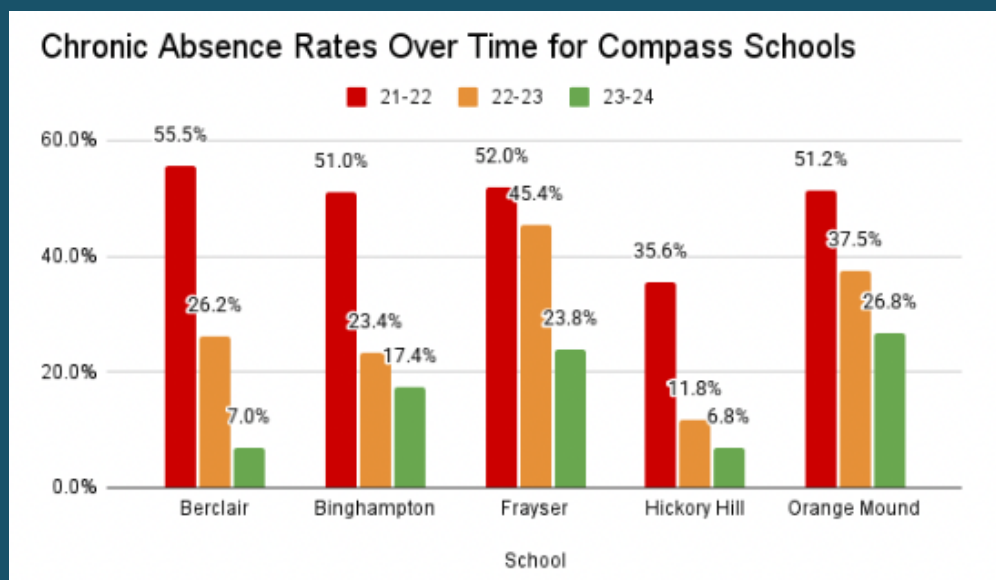


Memphis Charter Schools: Community-Rooted Strategies Drive Attendance Gains



At a glance

In Memphis, Attendance Works has partnered with a cohort of charter schools, supported by several local foundations, and is demonstrating that community-driven strategies can improve student attendance. Area charter schools implemented targeted strategies to reduce chronic absence, and some—like Compass Community Schools—posted substantial declines, with one campus dropping from 33% to 20% and another from 28% to 7%. Through partnerships with nonprofit experts and customized coaching sessions, the schools worked to build systems that emphasized prevention, early intervention and strong parent engagement. In the 2022-23 school year, over 28% of Memphis students were absent from classrooms, 8 percentage points above the state average of 20%, which includes district-managed and independent managed charter schools across Memphis-Shelby County Schools (MSCS). But within this challenging situation exists a story of coordinated action and community-grounded problem-solving. The charter partners are turning the tables, beginning with the district-level changes: stronger policies, dedicated personnel and a tiered support infrastructure. At the school level, educators are rebuilding trust with families, centering mental health, and creating a safe and welcoming school environment. The result is a promising example of the power of localized, community-rooted efforts.



Compass Charter Community schools offer compelling proof of what's possible when consistent systems, responsive family engagement and clear expectations are centered. Two of its campuses, Berclair and Hickory Hill, are seeing some of the lowest absence rates in the entire state of Tennessee.

These strategies have led to huge gains for charter schools across MSCS. Compass Berclair decreased student absence from 55.5% in 2021-22 to 7% in 2023-24, the largest improvement in Tennessee. Similarly, Compass Hickory Hill followed a similar pattern and saw a drop in student absence from 35.6% to 6.8% from 2021-22 to 2023-24.

Key strategies to combat chronic absence

- Charter network learning and collaboration: Charter schools authorized by MSCS (such as Compass, Gestalt and Freedom Prep) participate in Attendance Works professional development cohorts, share intervention strategies and collaborate on cross-network data use to reduce chronic absence together.
- Trusted relationships and family outreach: Charter schools across Memphis prioritized building strong, consistent relationships with students and families. Many schools designated specific staff, such as counselors or attendance leads, to serve as key points of contact for families, helping address barriers like transportation, housing instability and mental health needs. This “trusted adult” model allowed schools to provide personalized outreach and improve communication and connection between home and school.
- Real-time data for early intervention: Rather than waiting for quarterly or end-of-year reports, schools in the cohort leveraged real-time dashboards and weekly attendance reviews to identify students at risk of chronic absence. Staff conducted root-cause analyses to understand why students were missing school, and then used that information to guide case management and personalized support strategies.
- Wraparound supports through a community school lens: Several schools adopted or expanded a community school approach to meet nonacademic needs that often impact attendance. This included on-site food pantries, clothing closets, health-care referrals and access to mental health services. These wraparound supports were made possible through partnerships with local organizations and foundations.



“Every day a student is present in the classroom is a step toward reaching their full potential. We’ve seen firsthand that a team-based approach, daily family engagement and consistent celebration of attendance correlates with both academic growth and a thriving school culture. What started as an overwhelming challenge has become a powerful catalyst for post-pandemic achievement, and we couldn’t be more proud of our Compass community for their progress in combating chronic absenteeism.”

Kristi Baird, founder and executive director of Compass Community Schools

Charter network success spotlights

Compass community schools: Berclair Campus

- In 2023-24, Berclair reduced its chronic absence rate from 55.5% to just 7%, a 48.5 percentage point drop — the largest in Tennessee.
- Staff used the EveryDay Pro attendance software to categorize students into tiers and review data weekly, flagging trends and assigning follow-up responsibilities.
- Attendance team members made daily calls to families of absent students by 8:20 a.m., offering support and identifying barriers as early as possible.
- Letters were sent after three, five and eight missed days, with mandatory family conferences triggered by the eighth absence.
- The school tested two Plan-Do-Study-Act (PDSA) cycles focused on relationship-building with Tier 2 students. The first effort paired the principal with K-1 students for lunch buddies sessions. Later, the attendance team (principal, counselor and secretary) launched daily check-ins and checkouts with all Tier 2 students.
- Administrators organized bilingual community events with interpreters and printed resources to clarify that even excused absences contribute to chronic absence. They also proactively communicated with families who travel abroad for extended periods, helping to shorten the length of those trips by highlighting the academic impact of missed school days.
- Teachers and support staff greeted students in the car line each morning, sometimes wearing costumes and playing music, to help create a welcoming, joyful arrival experience. A daily morning meeting in every classroom creates a welcoming, joyful experience.
- Students who met attendance goals could earn “no uniform” days, small prizes, recognition during morning meetings, and quarterly field trips for 95%+ attendance, reinforcing daily routines and motivation.
- The schools implemented the approach without hiring any new staff, relying instead on shared protocols and staff-wide consistency.

Compass community schools: Hickory Hill Campus

- Hickory Hill decreased its chronic absence rate from 35.6% to 6.8% over two years, mirroring Berclair’s success using the same tiered model.
- The school’s attendance team included the principal, dean of students, counselor and office manager, who met regularly to assign student cases and follow up.
- Staff contacted families within hours of an absence and offered to meet in person or virtually to troubleshoot transportation or schedule issues.
- Counselors held lunch chats with Tier 2 and Tier 3 students, combining relationship-building with conversations about attendance goals.
- A responsive classroom-style daily morning meeting created predictable structure and a sense of belonging for every student.
- Parents were engaged through events with food, interpreters and information on distinguishing serious illness from minor symptoms.
- Each staff member had a defined role: Front office staff called families, the counselor and dean of students tracked Tier 2 and Tier 3 students and the principal stepped in only for high-risk situations.

September 2025

Attendance Works is a nonprofit, national and state initiative. Our mission is to advance success in school and beyond for all students by reducing chronic absence. Find free downloadable resources, research, consulting services and more on our website: www.attendanceworks.org