

## Parents Key to Curbing Chronic Absenteeism; New Study Explains How Some Schools are Beating the Odds

*Research from nonprofits Learning Heroes and TNTP finds that family engagement showed a stronger relationship with chronic absenteeism than poverty and highlights what distinguishes schools that outperform their peers*

**CHICAGO, Ill., (March 5, 2026)** — National nonprofit, [Learning Heroes](#), in partnership with TNTP and the Harvard Graduate School of Education, today released new findings from the Family Engagement Impact Study. The first stage found that schools with strong pre-pandemic family engagement had significantly lower chronic absenteeism and higher academic performance post pandemic, and that family engagement had a stronger relationship with absenteeism than poverty. The second stage identified practices and mindsets that distinguish “bright spot” schools with stronger-than-expected family engagement.

“The results of this study show how two schools in the same district could have wildly different outcomes when it comes to chronic absenteeism and student achievement,” said Dr. Eyal Bergman, the study’s lead author. “This research provides empirical evidence about the practices that actually make a difference and lays the groundwork for states, districts, and schools to re-create those conditions for students.”

Chronic absenteeism, when students miss [10% or more of school](#), spiked during the pandemic, but national estimates suggest that as many as 23.5% of students remain chronically absent from school. In Illinois, that rate is even higher (25.4%). Although [prior research](#) suggests that family engagement can influence absenteeism rates and boost student outcomes, education leaders need clearer, evidence-based insight into which specific practices are most effective – and how they work in everyday school environments.

Using a unique research methodology that utilized AI to analyze more than 100 interviews with Illinois school leaders, educators and families, the researchers identified four distinguishing characteristics among high performing bright spot schools:

- **Families as Partners:** Educators at bright spot schools expressed the belief that families and teachers are on the same team and share responsibility for student success. One principal captured this ethos succinctly, stating, “The ‘why’ is pretty simple. We don't achieve our mission without our families. Period.”

- **Leadership Sets the Vision:** School leadership establishes a clear vision, inspiration, expectations, and infrastructure. Bright spot principals clearly model expectations for family engagement, and set the conditions for follow-through.
- **Proactive, Personal, and Persistent Communication:** Bright spot schools distinguish themselves not simply through more communication, but through communication that is proactive, personal, and persistent. One teacher described the lengths they go to in order to connect with families: “We’ve knocked on doors of parents’ houses, parents’ work... even ridden the bus home with students to meet their parents.”
- **Relationships Extend Beyond the Classroom and School Year:** Bright spot educators emphasized building connections that go deeper than day-to-day interactions — getting to know families well and staying in touch with alumni to follow and support their journeys. As one educator put it, “It sounds so simple, but taking time to connect with the parent on a deeper level — not just ‘hi, how are you,’ but ‘how are you really? Is there anything I could do for you?’”

The study also surfaced a finding across the four distinguishing factors: how bright spot schools approached partnering with families across language and cultural differences. All schools in immigrant-rich communities offered translation and interpretation, but bright spot schools went further - hiring staff to support families, engaging students in the parent-teacher interaction, and ensuring families could act on the information they received. As one teacher explained, “I make a brochure for student-led conferences and translate it to Spanish with added explanation, because it’s easy to miss or misunderstand what’s sent home.”

“For over a decade, Learning Heroes’ research has shown that centering families in education is essential to student success,” said Bibb Hubbard, Founder & CEO of Learning Heroes. “These new findings not only reaffirm that evidence but take it to new heights — revealing the powerful insight that family engagement showed a stronger relationship with chronic absenteeism than poverty, and offering practical, actionable insights into how bright spot schools are achieving exceptional results.”

Both stages of the Family Engagement Impact Study utilized the 5Essentials survey. Rigorously validated through longitudinal research by the UChicago Consortium on School Research, the 5Essentials survey reflects the perspectives of approximately 80% of teachers across the nearly 4,000 schools in the nation’s most demographically representative states across race, income, and geography (rural, suburban, and urban).

**EMBARGOED UNTIL 1:00 PM CT ON MAR 5, 2026**

The report was officially released at a Chicago event on March 5 with families, educators, community organizations, policymakers, and philanthropic leaders, in collaboration with Kids First Chicago. Funding for the event was provided by Flamboyan Foundation and Lohengrin Foundation. To download the full report, please click [here](#).

### **About Learning Heroes**

Founded in 2014, Learning Heroes' mission is to accelerate home-school partnerships grounded in trust and centered on student success — advancing student achievement, school success, and thriving communities. As a national nonprofit, work with states, districts, and national and local organizations to bring families and educators together as partners in K-12 education. Our interconnected strategy is rooted in more than ten years of research on the home-school relationship, actionable communications for families and educators, and tools and professional learning experiences that directly impact student learning and well-being.

### **About TNTP**

TNTP has spent nearly three decades building partnerships with schools, districts, states, and policymakers across the country, not just researching what works, but implementing it alongside educators and leaders, then using what's learned to shape policy. This cycle of research, hands-on work, and advocacy is how TNTP has earned trust at every level of the system.