Strengthening School Attendance Through Connection

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Learning Objectives

1. **Understand** current trends in chronic absenteeism and key contributing factors.

2. **Explain** how internal systems and practices can surface or obscure attendance risk

3. **Identify** connection-based levers within schools to strengthen school attendance

The Scope of the Crisis

Mentimeter

How Many Days of Absence Per School Year Is Acceptable?

menti.com

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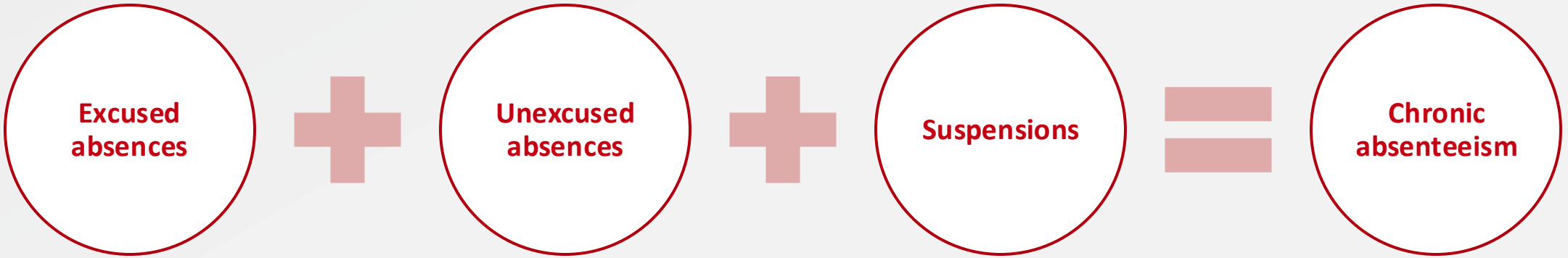
Waiting for participants

Defining Chronic Absenteeism

Chronic absenteeism is defined as missing 10% or more of the school year, regardless of reason

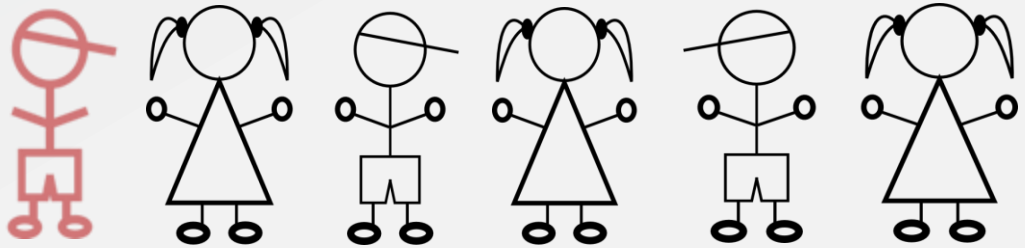


The COVID Surge in Chronic Absenteeism

Chronic absenteeism surged across the U.S. during the pandemic and remains elevated

15%

Were Chronically Absent Before COVID



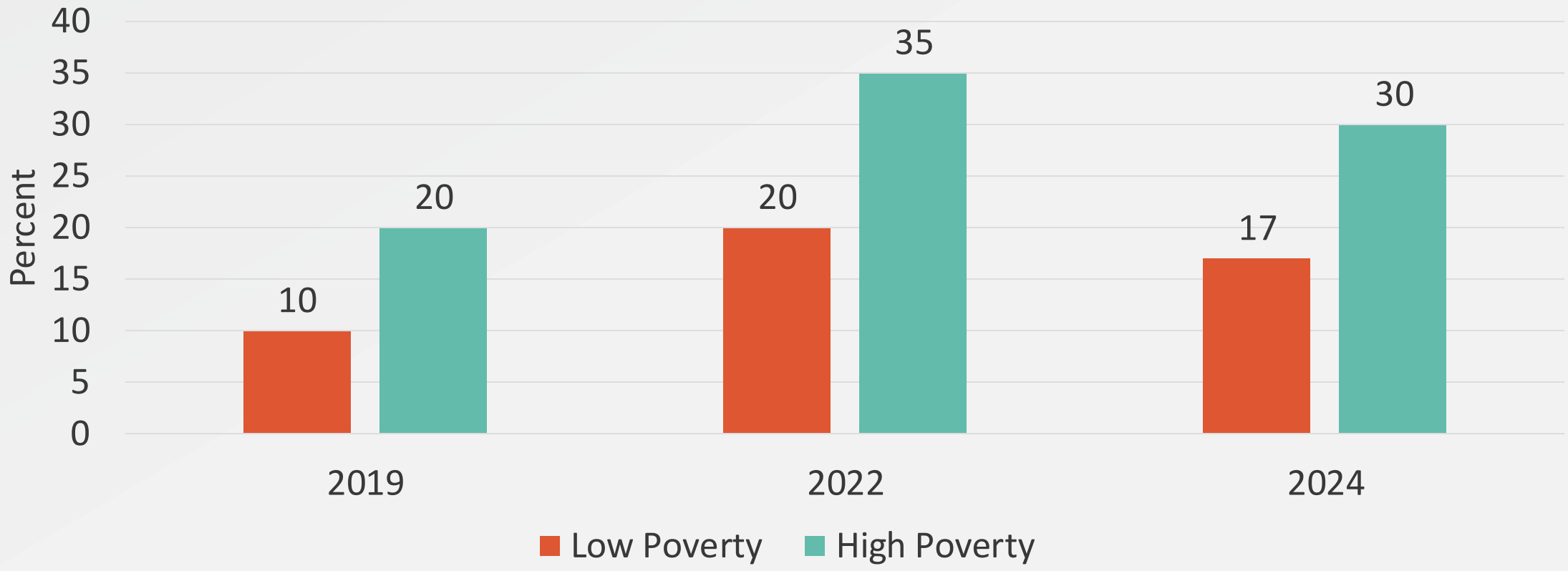
25%

Are Chronically Absent Today

This rise has impacted many groups

Source: Malkus (2024)

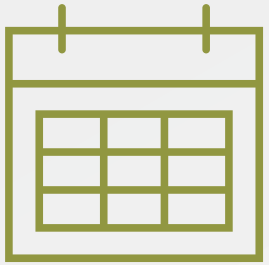
Poverty and the Chronic Absenteeism Divide



Source: Malkus (2025)

Missed Days Add Up

Average Days Missed per Student in CCS: **32**

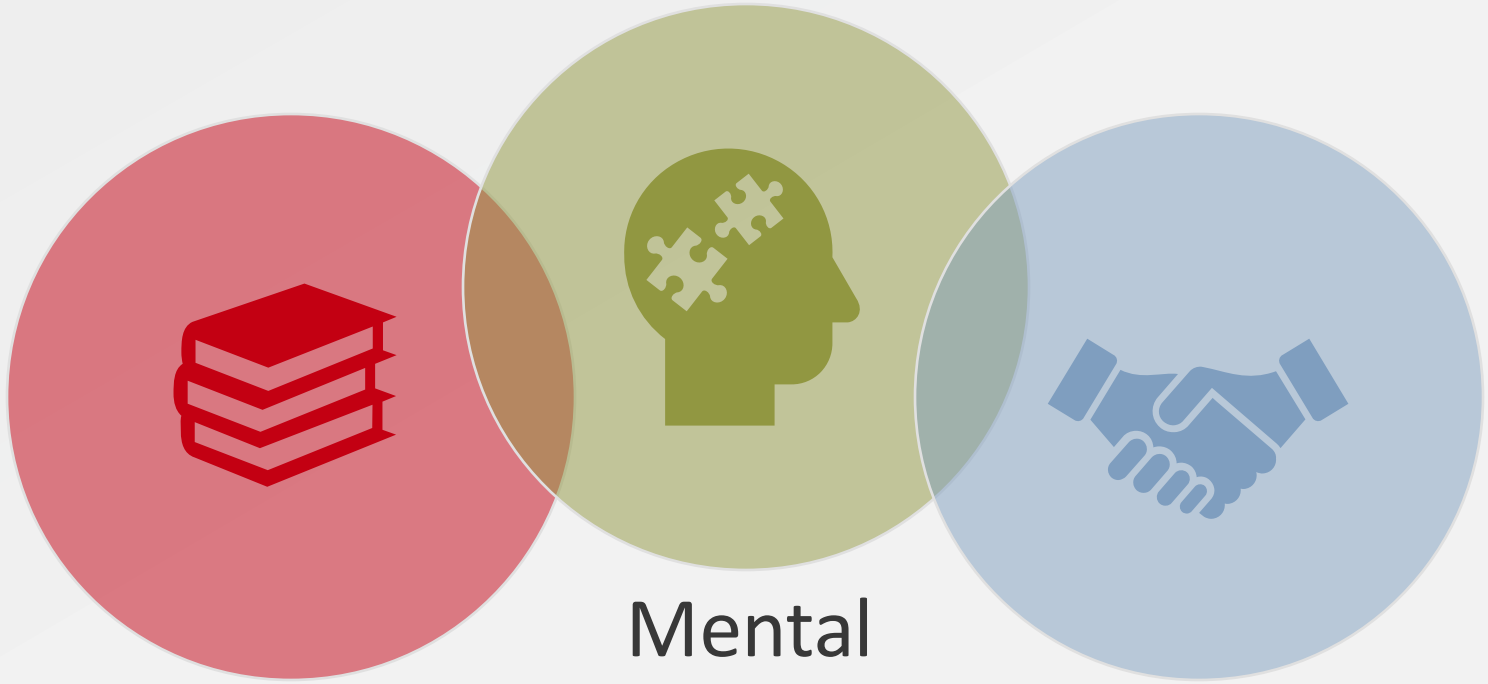


Equivalent to: **2.5 years of missed school**

That total loss of instructional time is like missing all of 1st, 6th, and half of 9th grade

Source: Ansari (2025), analysis of Columbus City Schools data from the 2023-24 school year

The Immediate Consequences



Source: Ansari and colleagues (2021, 2024) Ansari & Purtell (2018)

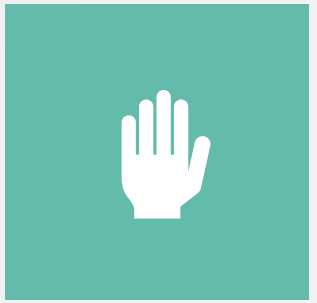
The Long-term Consequences

Behavioral

No difference in risky behavior

Economic

Lower employment odds, higher economic stress



Civic

Less likely to have voted

Educational

Lower HS GPA and college attainment

Source: Ansari, Hofkens & Pianta (2020)

Why Systems Miss Risk Early

Gradual absences blend into “normal” patterns

Schools respond when totals trigger formal thresholds

Intervention often come after pathways are already formed

Moving Beyond the Myths

Mentimeter

Why Are Students Absent From School Besides Sickness?

menti.com

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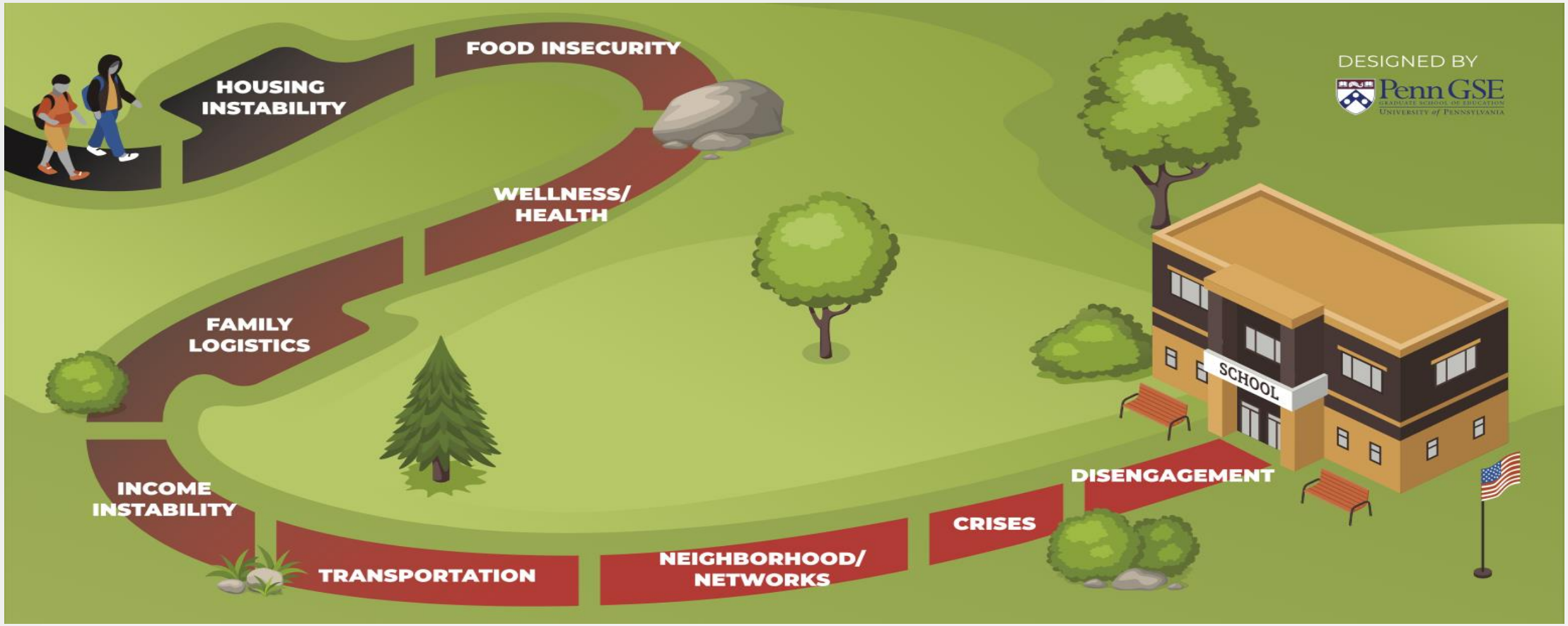
Outdated Assumptions

The Common Myth	The Data-Backed Reality	The Strategic Blindspot
Driven by post-COVID teacher absenteeism	Both increased, but not meaningfully linked	Directs administrative focus to the wrong solutions
Driven by unavoidable acute crises	Many absences reflect predictable stressors and disconnection	Makes absences look like endpoints rather than early warning signals
A completely new, post-COVID phenomenon	Root causes are the same as pre-COVID; students just have greater exposure and weaker buffers	Ignores proven, foundational interventions in favor of chasing novel fixes

Source: Ansari (2025), Gee, Lu, & Ansari (2025)

The Reality



Source: Ansari, Childs, et al. (2024)

Signals of Disconnection

Some student absences reflect emerging disconnection

- Feeling unsafe, embarrassed, or targeted
- Avoidance and disengagement (“boring,” “given up”)
- These patterns often appear in the early grades and increases over time

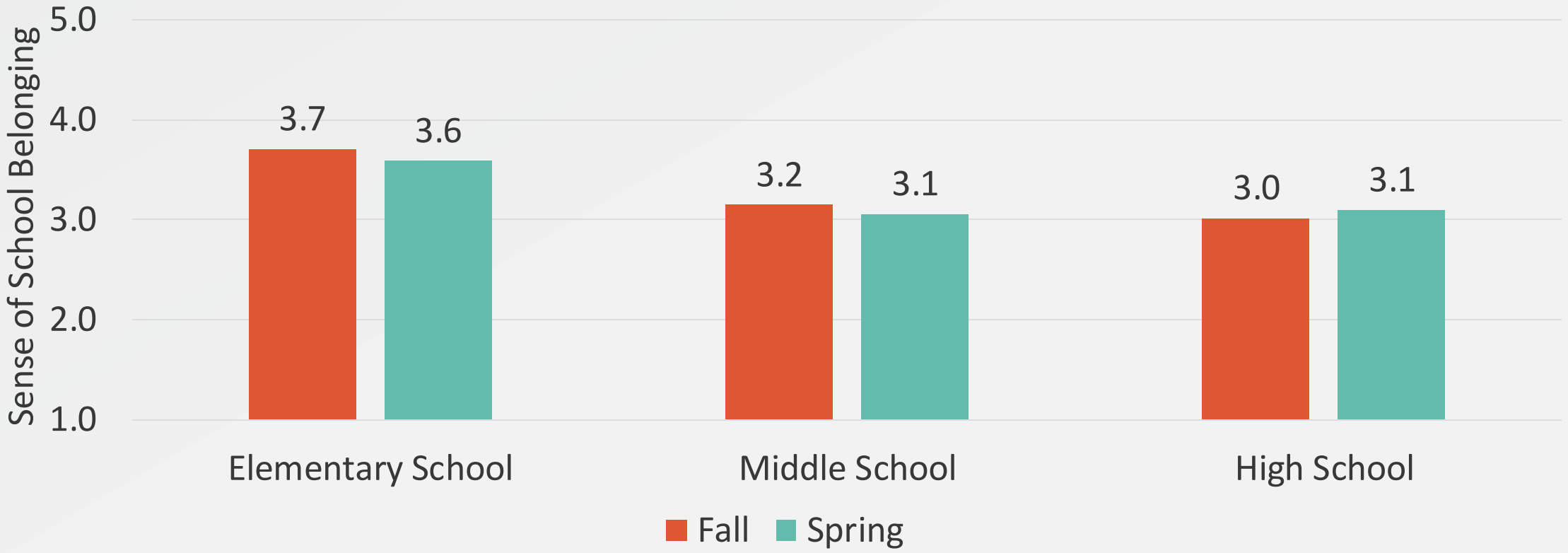
These absences are important signals

Source: Gee, Yu, & Ansari (2025)

A Core Lever: School Belonging

Students' Sense of School Belonging

Belonging Trends by Grade Level



Source: Ansari, Kadir, Plasman, & Purtell (2024)

The Relationship Gap

For many students, school is not hard because it is demanding, it is hard because it is anonymous

1 in 4 students do not have a single adult at school they can rely on

1 in 5 students do not have a single peer they can rely on

1 in 10 students have neither an adult nor peer at school they can rely on

Source: Ansari (2026), analysis of Columbus City Schools data from the 2022-23 school year

The Vulnerable Window

	6th grade	7th grade	8th grade	9th grade
Chronic Absenteeism				
Lacking a Trusted Adult				
Lacking a Trusted Friend				

Source: Ansari (2026), analysis of Columbus City Schools data from the 2022-23 school year

Student Pathway Vignette

A student pathway we see repeatedly

- 6th grade: Misses Mondays. Quiet. Not flagged.
- 7th grade: Stops turning in reading assignments. No adult check-in.
- 8th grade: Avoids certain classes. Lacks a trusted adult.
- 9th grade: Absences cluster. Chronic status appears.

Where along this pathway could we have intervened earlier?

Relationships Are a Key Driver of Attendance

If no one notices you are gone, being gone is easier

Why Do Absences Escalate?

- No trusted adult = more missed days
- No trusted peer = more missed days
- These risks add up over time

What Changes Behavior?

- When students feel they belong
- They miss fewer days across the year
- They face a lower risk of chronic absenteeism

Source: Ansari, Kadir, Plasman, & Purtell (2024)

Relationships Are a Key Driver of Attendance

If we treat attendance as compliance

- We intervene late
- We respond after patterns are established
- We focus on monitoring and enforcement

If we treat attendance as connection

- We intervene earlier
- We respond to warning signals
- We strengthen relationships before absences escalate

Multi-Tiered Systems of Support provides the structure for where to respond. Relationships help determine whether we respond in time.

A Foundation of Attendance is Belonging

What is one strategy you can implement this week to ensure no student in your care remains anonymous?

Four Strategic Pillars to Build Systems of Belonging

Keep the Problem in Focus
Absenteeism is a critical equity issue with impacts for individuals and society

Invest Strategically
Direct attention toward early signals and transition years

Center Student Experiences
Prioritize belonging and engagement as malleable factors

Build Community Partnerships
Work actively with families and local organizations to mitigate barriers

Thank You!

Feel free to contact me with any questions or ideas: ansari.81@osu.edu