

## Addressing Chronic Absenteeism Grants SUMMARY

Updated: Sept. 3, 2024

The Department of Education (DOE) reached out to school districts that received Addressing Chronic Absenteeism grants in 2023. Details of how districts used the grants to address absenteeism, efforts that were effective, and lessons learned from the process are shared here. The feedback is from reports submitted by those districts that had a *full* school year to implement the grant.

Overall, the schools found that hiring an attendance liaison/coordinator/advocate was an effective way to increase attendance. Having a dedicated staff to connect with students and families reduced absenteeism in each school's case.

The **Sioux Falls School District (SFSD)**, for example, saw increased attendance in the six schools they focused their efforts upon. Those schools – four elementary and two middle schools – each hired an attendance liaison, who contacted families through phone calls, text messages, home visits, and school visits with the family. “We have noticed that the most effective practices involve a hands-on approach with personal human contact,” the report from SFSD reads. The district also hired an academic recovery teacher to be shared between the two middle schools to assist with academic learning loss caused by excessive absenteeism.

The **Pierre School District (PSD)** implemented Check & Connect, an intervention to be used with students who show warning signs of disengagement, such as poor attendance, behavioral issues, and/or low grades. Students flagged as at risk are connected with adult mentors who work with the student to increase attendance and academic performance. The district also communicated with families of children who had attendance issues. Pierre's report indicates that they learned the importance of wording in their communication to students and families. The district noted that it will take care to introduce liaisons/coordinators as (name) from school to support rather than other language which may cause stress for the family.

The **Sisseton School District** also used Check & Connect with positive results. The district identified 34 students (and families) whose attendance record indicated they were at risk for engagement and attendance. Of the 34 referred, 25 received mentoring during the year, meeting weekly to build relationships, set goals, communicate with parents, and review progress throughout the year. “Students in the program have shown growth in attendance as well as academic success,” Sisseton's report states. The students appreciate the positive relationship with the adult mentor, and the teachers report increased communication with colleagues regarding students once they are enrolled in the mentor program. (The mentors are able to reach out to teachers to discuss strategies that may help the student to succeed.) Fifty percent of high school students in Sisseton's mentoring program increased attendance;

17 percent of middle school students with mentors increased attendance. (Mentoring began later in the year for middle school students.)

**The Wilmot and Waubay School Districts** also used Check & Connect successfully. Both districts hired an attendance coordinator/advocate. Attendance numbers improved substantially for both districts. "With the addition of an attendance advocate, we now have an enhanced support system which allows for increased involvement of families to address the root cause of absenteeism. We have implemented tailored interventions which has led to better attendance," reads the Wilmot report. The advocate also worked closely with the Sisseton Wahpeton Oyate Tribal Agency to hold weekly attendance drawings and recognize good attendance. Waubay struggled to find a person to fill the position of absenteeism coordinator. Once they did hire someone, that person was able to provide transportation for students and to hold parents accountable for student attendance. "Our parents and students got to know our Absenteeism Coordinator and appreciated what we were doing," the report says. "Our greatest challenge has been to hire staff to fill this position. We struggle to find staff in other areas of school as well. It is difficult to implement a program if you don't have staff to run the programs."

Throughout the year, all school districts faced challenges in addressing absenteeism, and they found ways to address the challenges.

- Coordinating interventions across different student populations and reaching students with severe absenteeism issues led to Sioux Falls increasing training for liaisons and to prioritize collaboration between liaisons, school administrators, and district leaders; this ensured that resources were effectively targeted.
- Pierre found that some issues that were causing absenteeism were beyond the school's remit. The district partnered with the Department of Social Services and PARS (Pierre Area Referral Service), but even with those resources, the limited funds available must be targeted to the right areas in ways that do not enable responses that would ultimately hold the student back. Finding that balance is a challenge. PSD also met with resistance from families at first when liaisons were upfront about their role. Families needed to be approached in a careful, nonjudgemental way to ensure that families would not increase avoidance of the school. Finally, the district noted that helping families understand the local bussing system will be key for chronically absent students to get to school.
- Waubay School District's most significant challenge was finding qualified staff to fulfill the position of attendance coordinator. For the 2024-25 school year, the position is being filled by a Student Success Coordinator, who will focus on student discipline and attendance.
- Wilmot School District noted that their most significant challenge was identifying the root causes of absenteeism. Some, of course, are obvious and easy to address, while others are not. For example, the school has a problem with senior students dropping out throughout the year; the school intends to implement new strategies to address this tendency.

All five school districts were able to improve their attendance numbers. Some moved the needle only a little, but Wilmot's numbers show incredible gains. While in 2022-23, 53 percent of students had "good"

attendance; in 2023-24, 72 percent of students had good attendance status. The effect was most pronounced for the middle school, which went from having 34 percent of students listed as “chronically” absent in 2022-23 to 14.8 percent in 2023-24. The high school numbers (comparing 2022-23 to 2023-24) were similarly impressive.

Besides hiring attendance personnel, the school districts also used grant money to pay for advertising campaigns and to provide Check & Connect professional development sessions for educators. The districts will continue their efforts to combat high chronic absenteeism and low attendance numbers by using their challenges and lessons learned to adjust and replicate projects, activities, and programs that they found successful last year.

Funds for the Addressing Chronic Absenteeism Grants are federal funds distributed through the Stronger Connections Grant. Addressing Chronic Absenteeism Grants for the nine current grantees end in 2026. No additional federal funds are planned to be allocated to school districts for the foreseeable future.

# ACA Monitoring Report Year 2

Both ACA 1 and ACA 2 grantees were required to complete the monitoring report. The report included a narrative of the programming, sharing success and challenges with supporting data if available, reflection of the years budget, plans for modifications if necessary, and additional APR reporting questions. Below are some highlighted successes that the districts shared.

- Families have become more aware of the process, the letters, the resources, and the school's intent. The Check and Connect program has helped build relationships and kids have felt welcomed and genuinely cared for. Family nights have been important at the elementary buildings.
- Across the six schools participating in the Attendance Grant, student attendance has improved. The percentage of students classified as "Good" attenders (absent less than 5% of enrolled days) increased by 2.79%. The percentage of students in the "Warning" category (absent between 5% and 10% of the enrolled days) was reduced by 2.86%, and the percentage of chronically absent students (absent 10% or more of enrolled days) has improved by 2.4%.
- A student who had nearly 90 absences last year reduced that to 31 this year. Their mom said she felt supported.
- An 8th-grade student told us that a family member encouraged her to dropout the previous year, but she knew that we would call, text, or come to the house. This support kept the student coming to school.
- Our staff have noticed a difference with students being in their classrooms more. Our families have appreciated our concern for their children.
- Parents report that they appreciate the communication and the support from mentors to help them keep their students on track for success. Students in the program have shown growth in attendance as well as academic success. They seem to appreciate the positive relationship built with the mentor as they often struggle to have positive relationships with adults at school. Teachers report that they communicate with colleagues more about students they share when they are in the mentor program. This helps them to help the students more and to share what works and what doesn't work with fellow teachers.

**"We are seeing our highest attendance rates for economically disadvantaged students this year at over 93%"**

- Our data is showing success by decreasing the overall chronic absenteeism rate and a decrease in our behavior incidents.
- We have been able to provide our students, staff and families with many opportunities that we would otherwise not have been able to. It has allowed us to provide high-quality engagement opportunities/programming and valuable staff training. Our recovery room has become a great asset to the district and to students who may otherwise have dropped out of school all together.
- We feel that the Attendance Liaison has made a positive impact on the students and families of our district, by assisting in combating barriers for those in our district. Families are understanding this position and its importance with our students/families. Along with holding families accountable for making sure their student is making it to school consistently.
- The 2nd grade, 3rd grade, 5th grade, 7th grade, and 10th grade levels saw overall improvement in chronic absenteeism rates in SY24-25 from the previous year. District-wide, the chronic absenteeism rate dropped from 15.282% for SY23-24, to 15.048% for the SY24-25.
- Our district average attendance has been holding fairly steady at about 95%. In comparison, last past few years we have seen the attendance rate at 84%-90%.

*Report was prepared by Stephanie Cronin,  
21st Century Program Specialist, South Dakota Department of Education.*