

## How Prince William Co. schools is addressing rise in post-pandemic absences

Almost a quarter of Prince William County Public Schools' 91,000 students missed 10% or more of the first 90 days of the school year, prompting leaders to craft innovative ways to address a rise in chronic absenteeism.

In a presentation to the school board Wednesday night, Dr. Michael Neall, the school system's director of research, accountability and strategic planning, said there was an "overall decrease" in second-quarter attendance, with the greatest decrease among high school students.

Similarly, over 28% of special education students reported nine or more absences in the second quarter, as did 26.5% of English language learners.

Some of the absences, Neall said, can be attributed to holidays, such as Thanksgiving, winter break and the Presidents' Day weekend in February. Virginia's second-largest school system also reported an increase in the number of students missing school due to COVID-19, the flu and RSV in the early winter months, which could have contributed to the rise in absences, he said.

Still, Neall called the number of students with nine or more absences in the second quarter "substantially higher than we would like it to be." Now, the county is working toward solutions to keep students engaged and in school after the peak of the pandemic.

"We know that there is a correlation between absenteeism and classroom performance," Neall said. "Stated simply, better attendance is associated with higher grades."

It's also difficult, Neall said, "to make a connection and foster a sense of belonging when students aren't present in school."

### Absenteeism is also a metric used in the school accreditation process.

Every county school is working to implement an attendance plan that addresses chronic absenteeism, and a new initiative called "Attention to Attendance" that will "improve the fidelity of chronic attendance notifications" is being rolled out in 54 schools, Neall said.

Parent notification of absences is done electronically, but school staff are then tasked with following up with them.

### Second Quarter Attendance for SY2022-23

% Attendance by Level	
Level	9 or more Absences
Combined*	14.91%
Elementary	21.81%
Middle	20.04%
High	28.74%

\*Combined schools have grades K-8 (Nokesville, Pennington, and Porter).

% Attendance by Student Group	
Student Group	9 or more Absences
English Learner	26.5%
Gifted	14.75%
Special Education	28.48%



% Attendance by Ethnicity	
Ethnicity	9 or more Absences
Asian	21.45%
Black	18.11%
Hispanic	29.94%
Multiple Races	20.42%

### A student is deemed "chronically absent" when they miss 10% or more of days in a school year.

The county has also started hosting re-engagement nights, and has reengaged 31 students.

"A couple of years ago, we were saying it's a culture of acceptable absenteeism — if you don't feel well, stay home," said Denise Huebner, associate superintendent for student services and postsecondary success. "What we're saying now is it's critical for your child to be in school, and if there isn't an illness, and even if it is for a justified reason, we will be asking you for that documentation."

If a student misses 10 or more days of school, Huebner said, the school system will request medical documentation from a doctor.

Attendance challenges aren't unique to Prince William County, Neall said, adding that "what we are hearing is that attendance is an issue not just for us, but our surrounding school divisions."

Superintendent LaTanya McDade said at a recent superintendent's meeting with top school leaders from across the county, "the number one problem that was expressed was around absenteeism and truancy post pandemic."

"This is an ongoing topic of concern," McDade said.