



# **Unlocking the Door to Chronic Absenteeism: Keys for Boosting Student Engagement and Motivation – A moozoom Pilot Study**

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Chronic absenteeism has become one of the biggest challenges currently facing schools, especially in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. While various factors can influence student attendance, key strategies like improving classroom climate, building strong teacher-student relationships, and fostering social-emotional skills have proven to be effective when encouraging students to attend school. A positive classroom climate is crucial to create a safe and productive environment for both students and educators. This includes strong connections between teachers and students, along with positive interactions among peers. When classrooms create a positive atmosphere, disruptive behaviors tend to decrease while student motivation, engagement, attendance, and peer relationships tend to improve. Over time, programs that focus on social-emotional learning (SEL) and restorative practices can significantly reduce chronic absenteeism, suspensions, arrests, and dropout rates. The challenge is to accelerate these improvements by creating meaningful and immediate change. Educators who incorporate SEL and restorative practices into their classroom culture often observe better outcomes, as both teachers and students become more engaged and motivated.

For busy and overworked educators, most SEL programs are too difficult or time-consuming to implement and fail to deliver results when seeking to engage students in meaningful learning opportunities. Unlike other SEL programs, moozoom offers a unique SEL and restorative practice solution that delivers peer-mediated modelling in high-quality, movie-like videos that are engaging and meaningful to students while reducing preparation and instruction time for educators. This pilot study invited more than 4,000 teachers using moozoom's SEL platform to complete a brief monthly survey about their classroom climate. Over the course of four months, they reported statistically significant improvements in ease of teaching and students' ability to manage emotions, foster positive interactions, and resolve conflicts with others, along with a greater availability to learn. These initial findings show promising results for the effectiveness of moozoom when seeking to improve teacher and student well-being, as well as the overall climate in the classroom.

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### Keywords

multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS), social-emotional learning (SEL), restorative practices, classroom climate, teacher-student relationships, emotional management, self-regulation, peer relationships, conflict resolution, student engagement, ease of teaching, attendance, chronic absenteeism, suspensions, student arrests, dropout rates

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For busy and overworked educators, most SEL programs are **too difficult** or **time-consuming** to implement



## WHY IS EVERYONE TALKING ABOUT CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM?

One of the biggest problems currently facing schools involves chronic absenteeism (missing 10% of school days or more (approximately one month), with these figures nearly doubling from 15% in 2018 to 26% in 2023.<sup>1</sup> In California, 24.3% of K-8 students were chronically absent during the 2023-2024 school year.<sup>2</sup> Higher rates were observed for African American (36.4%), American Indian (36.1%), foster youth (33.6%), homeless (38.7%), Pacific Islander (37.6%), disabled (33.1%), and socioeconomically disadvantaged students (29.9%). Graduation rates show similar patterns with far fewer disadvantaged students graduating from high school. In the U.S., 10% of kindergarten and 1st grade students miss a full month of school and the rates only increase for middle and high school students.<sup>3</sup> Children from low-income families are two to three times more likely to engage in chronic absenteeism and generally access fewer resources when addressing their needs (health issues, mental health problems, transportation, community and school safety, etc.).<sup>4</sup>

Missing too many days of school, whether justified or not, can result in poor academic performance, health disparities, a higher risk of dropping out, along with social-emotional and mental health issues.<sup>5</sup> The reasons for persistent absenteeism can include bullying, unsafe conditions at school, housing instability, substance abuse, and other factors. Middle and high school students often feel that their social-emotional needs are not supported in school.<sup>6</sup> While school avoidance is not a new problem, it has skyrocketed since the COVID-19 pandemic and is estimated to affect up to 16% of students.<sup>6</sup> This data is hard to quantify with any precision because states and districts have not codified the reasons behind absences. School avoidance refers to a student's consistent refusal to attend school or attempt to return home while attending school. School avoidance is primarily associated with students who have disabilities, mental health issues, and social problems.<sup>7</sup>

Currently, 14 states in the U.S. are seeking to reduce chronic absenteeism by 50% over five years.<sup>8</sup> This effort targets approximately 20% of the country's public school students (roughly 9.6 million students). The first step in addressing absenteeism is similar to the first step used when addressing behavioral challenges: creating a positive school climate where students feel safe, motivated, engaged, and supported. Positive behavioral interventions and support (PBIS), restorative practices, and SEL represent key components when creating a positive classroom climate.



Middle and high school students often feel that **their social-emotional needs are not supported** in school

## MULTI-TIERED ATTENDANCE SUPPORT

The MTSS framework (multi-tiered systems of supports) was designed to help schools identify students who may need targeted or individualized support to achieve academic, behavioral, and social-emotional well-being.<sup>9</sup>

The Attendance Playbook (2023) organizes MTSS activities for chronic absenteeism based on the number of school days missed by students.<sup>10</sup> These include both justified and unjustified absences. Several unjustified absences are considered truancy. Since justified and unjustified absences result in learning loss, social difficulties, behavioral challenges and other problems, however, chronic absenteeism makes no distinction between both types of absences.

### Tier 3: Individualized Support

Students missing 20% of their school days or more are considered to engage in chronic absenteeism and often require individualized case management that goes beyond the available school services.<sup>10</sup> This may include homeless students and pregnant teens, as well as students with mental illnesses, health issues, and disabilities. Students with ADHD, autism, or developmental delays are twice as likely to engage in chronic absenteeism, and students with health issues like asthma or type 1 diabetes, as well as mental health issues like anxiety or depression, are also more likely to qualify for Tier 1 support involving chronic absenteeism.<sup>11</sup> Students with school-related anxiety make up roughly 5% of the youth population; it is often difficult to motivate these students to attend school or remain in school. When absences are unjustified, students can be labelled as truant and lose course credits and the opportunity to graduate, while others may be excluded from extracurricular activities or face legal action. While punitive actions typically fail to improve attendance,<sup>12</sup> preventative and proactive interventions tend to be more successful.

Despite the increase in chronic absenteeism observed in many school districts, 80 such districts in California were able to consistently reduce the phenomenon by shifting the mindset from the attribution of fault to the creation of accountability, building a positive community, setting public goals, using red flags to intervene before a student's absenteeism becomes problematic, holding attendance compliance reviews, integrating attendance goals into the PBIS and MTSS frameworks,



ensuring consistent communication with families, building a support team within each school, building strong relationships with students and families, and by creating a restorative path rather than a punitive one.<sup>13</sup>

Restorative practices like self-regulation, conflict resolution, problem solving, and building relationships are some of the components used in moozoom, which can help build trust, motivation, and social skills for students requiring Tier 3 support, particularly those who may have social anxiety or lack motivation to attend school due to the social challenges involved.

## Tier 2: Targeted Support

Students missing 10-19% of their school days are also considered to engage in chronic absenteeism and show a greater risk of developing more serious problems if the behavior persists.<sup>10</sup> To prevent the application of Tier 3 support, it is important for schools to track student behavior, academic performance, and social-emotional well-being before attendance problems worsen.

Targeted student engagement that focuses on emotional regulation, problem solving, self-control, self-awareness, and other social-emotional skills can also reduce absenteeism, behavioral challenges, and other significant issues within school districts. Improving school climate is one of the most effective ways to increase student motivation and willingness to attend and remain in school.<sup>10</sup>



While **punitive actions typically fail** to improve attendance, preventative and proactive interventions tend to be more successful.

## Improving School Climate

School climate in the U.S. is particularly important for the 46 million children who are exposed to trauma outside of school (hunger, homelessness, abuse, neglect, death of a family member, community violence, etc.).<sup>14</sup> Trauma can cause immense stress, anxiety, and sleep problems. It can bring about other negative consequences that lead to difficulties involving concentration, attention, memory, and social interaction. Supportive relationships with teachers and other school staff can improve the negative impacts of trauma while building resilience that can last for many years to come. In the United States, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) emphasizes the importance of the

child as a whole, including his or her social-emotional well-being. ESSA encourages schools to focus on academic achievement, as well as on the learning environment (i.e., the classroom climate).<sup>14</sup>

Among many other strategies, Darling-Hammond & DePaoli (2020)<sup>14</sup> strongly recommend the use of SEL and restorative practice principles when creating a positive classroom climate. According to the research, school climate can have a positive or negative impact on academic, behavioral, and social-emotional outcomes<sup>15</sup> and is one of the most significant factors that affect bullying and violence. Strong educator-student relationships and a positive classroom climate are strongly associated with reduced bullying and violence in schools.<sup>11</sup>

Educators report that moozoom can enhance classroom climate by improving relationships between educators and students, building prosocial behaviors, and teaching students to use executive function skills to address problems. The pilot study described below demonstrates some of these positive changes.

## **Reducing Challenging Behaviors**

Challenging behaviors negatively affect learning for everyone in the classroom. They also cause tension, stress, and safety concerns for students, educators and administrators, along with parents and caregivers. When students returned to schools following the COVID-19 pandemic, behavioral problems skyrocketed and teachers found themselves ill-equipped to manage these issues. Common behavioral challenges included tantrums, aggression, elopement (running off), self-injurious behavior, emotional outbursts, noncompliance, bullying, and chronic absenteeism. The rise in behavioral challenges led many schools to increase disciplinary actions, including out-of-school suspensions. In New York City Public Schools, for example, suspensions increased by 27%, while Washington, D.C. saw a 16% increase in its rate of suspension.<sup>16</sup> These rates are much higher for black students and other disadvantaged groups. In California, the suspension rate is 2.5 times higher for black students.<sup>17</sup> In a study by Prothero (2023), 70% of teachers reported an increase in behavioral challenges (compared to 66% of teachers in 2019).<sup>18</sup>

In a recent survey, the top concern for parents and caregivers regarding their children involves anxiety and depression, as 40% feel extremely concerned or very concerned, while 36% feel somewhat concerned.<sup>19</sup> The second most significant concern involves bullying, as 35% of U.S. parents report feeling extremely or very concerned about their child being subjected to bullying (39% are somewhat concerned). In addition, more than half of all teens report that online bullying and harassment represent a significant problem, while another 40% report bullying as a minor problem. Twenty-two percent of students report having been bullied at school. Girls (25%), middle school students (28%), and rural students report the highest numbers (28%). Most incidents of bullying occur in the classroom (47%).

Educators using moozoom report a decrease in challenging behaviors and conflicts among students. This is done by teaching students to resolve conflicts with peers, modelling self-regulation techniques, and promoting responsible decision-making. The data appears in the pilot study below.

### **Tier 1: Universal Support**

Universal Tier 1 support can be applied to all students, staff, and families. With regard to attendance, Tier 1 support seeks to prevent frequent absences and chronic absenteeism.<sup>10</sup> Schools need to ensure the physical, emotional, and social safety of students while nurturing their sense of belonging. They also need to keep students engaged and challenge them academically while creating meaningful relationships that promote attendance.

Absenteeism can be reduced through family engagement, culturally relevant instruction, restorative disciplinary practices, out-of-school programs, positive educator-student interactions, attendance incentives, structured activities during recess, healthy school buildings, school-based health care, free meals for all students, along with reliable and safe transportation, as well as other preventative strategies. The most important factor when maintaining attendance, however, is positive relationships with peers and educators.

### **The Keys to Opening Doors to Positive Classroom Climates and Getting Results**

While many factors contribute to chronic absenteeism, behavioral challenges, peer relationships, student well-being and teacher-student relationships, along with the stress and well-being of teachers, can drastically impact these factors.<sup>20</sup> The well-being of the educator is equally important when considering the well-being of students.

The Department of Education (DOE) recommends that schools focus on school climate and attendance, along with student and teacher well-being.<sup>21</sup> While many educators report lacking sufficient time for SEL or wellness instruction and activities, the DOE indicates that prioritizing SEL by eliminating unnecessary meetings and providing lighter workloads typically improves the climate, student behavior, attendance, and job satisfaction among educators.<sup>21</sup>

Several studies have shown that supportive, positive, and warm relationships between teachers and students are linked to fewer behavioral challenges<sup>22</sup> and improved academic performance, as well as overall student achievement.<sup>23</sup> When educators entertain quality relationships with their students, improvements can be seen in student motivation and engagement, self-regulation, adaptability to change, and overall social-emotional functioning.<sup>24</sup> SEL can improve relationships between educators and students and can potentially improve instructional practices and interactions with students.<sup>25</sup>

It has been shown that relationships between teachers and students, as well as between students, are determinative. How can we build these relationships? One of the most studied and popular approaches involves Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS). This multi-tiered



framework supports academic, behavioral, and social-emotional skills for all students. One of the primary aims of PBIS is to provide universal support for all students, not merely those who display behavioral challenges. In fact, PBIS can help prevent problematic behaviors from occurring altogether.<sup>26</sup>

Restorative practices are often used in a PBIS framework to avoid punishment or exclusionary practices, like suspensions and expulsions. Restorative practices focus on teaching students preventative skills, like conflict resolution, self-regulation, self-management, problem solving, communication, empathy, and responsible decision-making. Research shows that restorative practices can reduce challenging behaviors, suspensions, arrests, and dropout rates.<sup>27</sup>

One important component of a strong PBIS framework is social-emotional learning (SEL). According to the research, SEL improves academic performance, attendance, and perceptions of school safety, along with the well-being of students and staff.<sup>28</sup> Improving the school climate is not merely encouraged but required to ensure student engagement, motivation, safety, and availability to learn.

When seeking to apply PBIS fully and teach SEL and restorative practices, it is important to utilize an evidence-based framework regarding teaching skills in a manner that produces measurable and meaningful short-term outcomes (i.e., knowledge and understanding), as well as long-term outcomes (i.e., generalization and maintenance). While often used in adult education, behavioral skills training (BST) is a teaching framework that has been proven to be effective in numerous studies when teaching adults and children in various contexts using both instruction and practice for better learning.<sup>29</sup> BST uses four basic teaching techniques: 1) Instruction 2) Modelling 3) Rehearsal/Practice, and 4) Feedback/Reflection. These four components provide multiple learning touchpoints and reinforce concepts through an engaging and interactive process.

The integration of BST, SEL, and restorative practices into a PBIS framework is the foundation of moozoom's solution to improve ease of teaching and the student's availability to learn, as well as his or her ability to manage emotions, enjoy positive interactions with others, and resolve conflicts. This pilot study sought to evaluate the potential of moozoom in achieving these goals.

## **MOOZOOM CLASSROOM CLIMATE PILOT STUDY**

moozoom offers high-quality, evidence-based behavior modelling movies that make it easy for educators to implement SEL with little planning or preparation. K-6 lessons target essential SEL skills like acceptance, empathy, peer influence, leadership, conflict resolution, emotional regulation, resilience, perseverance, self-reflection, problem solving, collaboration, self-regulation, inclusion, communication, and more. Implementation is simple. The movie is screened for students, who then engage in pre-established discussion questions, role-playing, journaling, and other interactive activities. Parent and caregiver emails are also provided to engage families in their child's SEL journey, while student access codes allow families to use moozoom at home. The platform includes a daily

Wellness Check-In for students, along with a monthly Teacher Classroom Wellness Assessment to help make data-informed decisions regarding the progress of students, along with the areas in which students are achieving the most success, or facing the most challenges. With an expert panel of educators, behavior analysts, psychologists, and counsellors, moozoom incorporates the best practices and science of PBIS, restorative practices, SEL, BST, wellness check-ins, and proven teaching strategies to help students develop stronger social-emotional skills.

Movie-based lessons offer several advantages for both students and staff.

#### **Education staff:**

- Reduces planning and preparation time;
- Time-efficient SEL lessons (10-30 minutes);
- Ties into ELA standards.

#### **Students:**

- Improves engagement in learning;
- Teaches meaningful and practical skills for social-emotional development;
- Provides evidence-based and peer-mediated video modelling to teach social-emotional skills.<sup>30</sup>

## **PARTICIPANTS**

In February of 2024, 4,527 educators completed the moozoom Educator Classroom Wellness Assessment for their classrooms; 2,422 of participants completed the survey in May of 2024. Participants stemmed from 1,420 schools in the U.S. (22%) and Canada (78%).

## **MEASURES**

The Educator Classroom Wellness Assessment was conducted on a monthly basis starting in February of 2024, when this feature was added to the moozoom platform. The survey collected data from teachers' observations regarding changes in student wellness and classroom climate over the previous 30 days. Educators were asked the following five questions on a 10-point Likert scale, with 1 being the lowest score and 10 being the highest.

#### **Please rate the following regarding your observations over the past 30 days:**

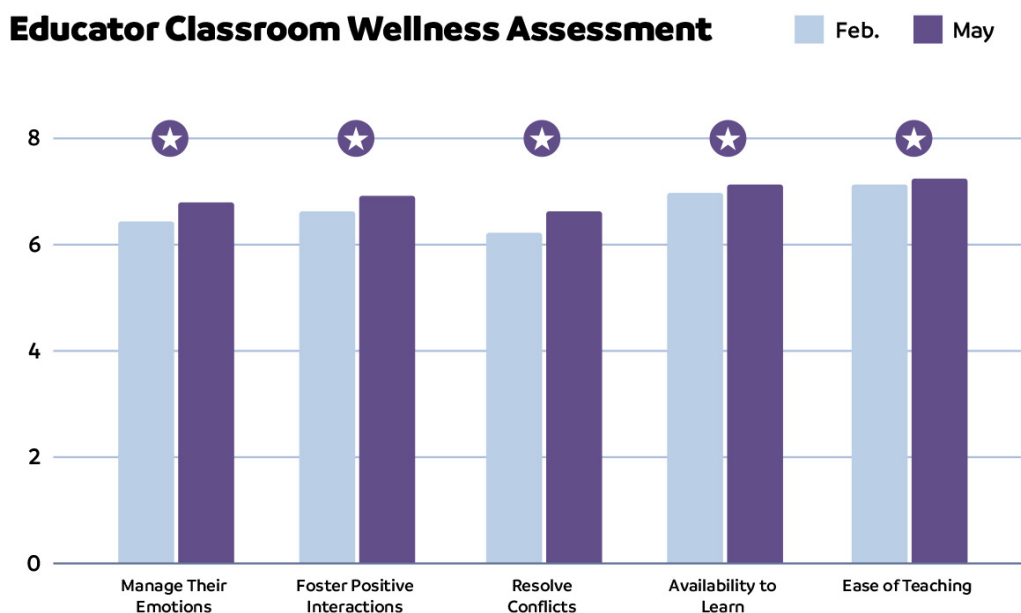
- Ease of teaching in the classroom;
- The students' ability to manage their emotions;
- The students' ability to engage in positive interactions with others;
- The students' availability to learn;
- The students' ability to resolve conflicts.

They were also asked to rate the frequency of student conflicts in their classroom (decreased significantly, decreased slightly, remained about the same, increased slightly, increased significantly).

## RESULTS

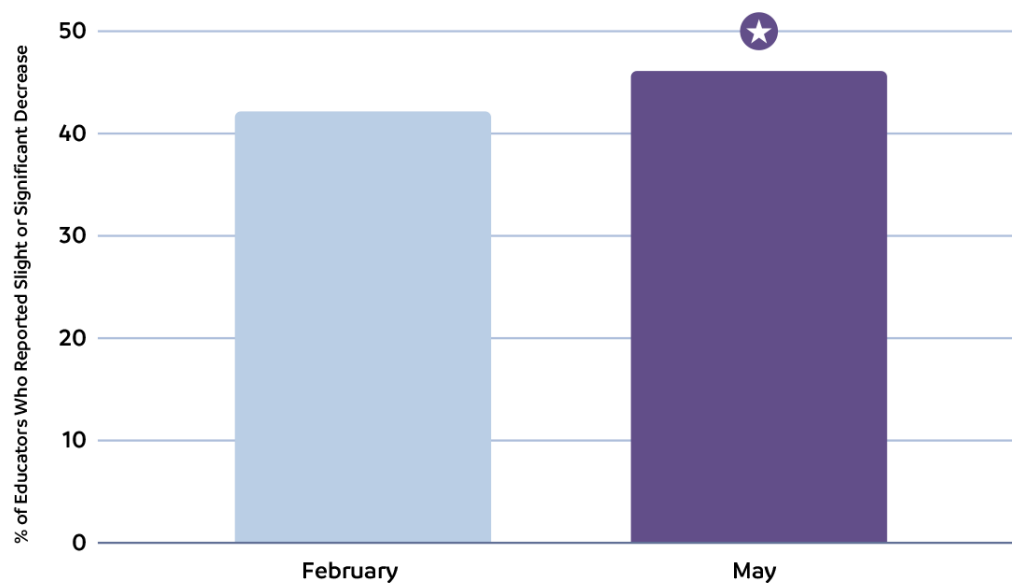
Every component received a higher rating in May than in February, with the greatest improvements noted in the students' ability to manage their emotions, engage in positive interactions with others, and resolve conflicts. These changes reflect the moozoom components that directly target these skills in the SEL movies, discussions, role-playing, journaling, quizzes, and other activities. In a short amount of time, teachers noticed positive changes in their students. While preliminary, this data shows promise regarding the use of moozoom to positively impact student behavior and interactions.

### Statistically significant positive changes ( $p < .01$ )



Teachers also reported a significant or slight decrease in student conflicts between February and May. This change is also statistically significant ( $p < .01$ ).

### More Educators Reported Student Conflicts Decreased Slightly or Significantly



## CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

According to this pilot study, teachers reported significantly positive changes in classroom climate and student behavior in a short span of time. These results are encouraging when considering the potential of moozoom to generate meaningful outcomes for students while lessening the burden for educators. Future studies should include more teachers and evaluate the impact of moozoom over longer periods. The impact of regular SEL activities on student emotions will also be monitored, along with the impact of moozoom on attendance and educator well-being. The effects of moozoom on chronic absenteeism, suspensions, and dropout rates, along with other critical factors, will also be prioritized. Additionally, moozoom will soon target SEL-related skills for middle and high school students through student-driven content.

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