



New York State Assembly
Committee on Education & Committee on Children and Families
Hearing on Chronic Absenteeism and Low Attendance in K-12 Education
Submitted Testimony by Sarah Jonas, Vice President of Youth Division at Children's Aid
Thursday, January 22nd, 2026

On behalf of Children's Aid, thank you Chair Benedetto and Chair Hevesi and the New York State Assembly for the opportunity to present testimony today, and for making time for this important conversation. My name is Sarah Jonas, and I am Vice President of the Youth Division at Children's Aid.

For over 170 years, Children's Aid has been committed to ensuring that there are no boundaries to the aspirations of young people, and no limits to their potential. By offering a continuum of services throughout childhood, Children's Aid prepares young people to succeed at every level of education and every milestone of life. Today, nearly 2,000 dedicated full and part time staff members serve over 36,000 children, youth, and families across more than 40 sites in New York City. Through our early childhood centers, community schools, community hubs, and health clinics, Children's Aid creates trusted spaces where families can access the full range of supports they need, close to home.

In addition to direct service delivery, Children's Aid also engages in policy and advocacy work at all levels of government. Our policy priorities are informed by what we know works for children and families and by the persistent barriers our organization and staff encounter while serving the one in four New York City children living in poverty. To this end, Children's Aid is a member and supports the policy agendas of numerous state-level coalitions including the New York State Community Schools Network, the New York State Network for Youth Success, and the Coalition for Equitable Education Funding.

Children's Aid's Community Schools

As part of our counterattack on the obstacles that threaten kids' achievements in school and in life, Children's Aid has been operating community schools in partnership with New York City Public Schools for over 30 years.

Across our 19 community schools, educators, families, students, and community partners work together to strengthen conditions for student learning and healthy development. Each school has a full-time community school coordinator who works closely with school leadership to coordinate integrated supports tailored to the needs of students and the broader school community. In addition to bringing critical resources, programs, and services into schools, these coordinators these coordinators conduct needs assessments, use data to guide decision-making, and advocate for their schools—ensuring supports are fully aligned throughout the school day and extended learning time.



Children's Aid community schools deliver programs and services across four core domains: academics; social-emotional development; health and wellness; and family and community engagement. These supports include afterschool programming, early childhood education, targeted academic interventions, attendance supports, school-based health clinics offering medical, dental, and vision care, mental health services and counseling, parent workshops, family events, and more—supporting the whole child and meeting families where they are.

How the Community School Strategy Addresses Chronic Absenteeism

We have seen firsthand how implementation of the community school strategy addresses many of the factors driving chronic absenteeism. Rather than treating absenteeism as a discipline or compliance issue, our community school partners see absenteeism as a sign of barriers or systemic challenges that prevent regular school attendance and engagement. These challenges can include housing instability, food insecurity, family stress, or mistrust of public school systems stemming from longstanding inequities.

Community schools address these barriers through coordinating school-based supports that meet immediate needs—such as health clinics, afterschool programs, and reliable meals—while also employing tailored, data-driven interventions, such as success mentoring, to increase school engagement and improve attendance. Underpinning these efforts is a focus on building strong, trusting relationships with students and families and fostering a shared vision and goals across the entire school community.

Many of these initiatives have produced powerful results. Across all our community schools, we saw an average 3 percentage point reduction in chronic absenteeism in the most recent school year, with many schools showing even more significant progress. For example, MS 322 in Washington Heights reduced chronic absenteeism by 12.4 percentage points in just one year through targeted interventions, including providing social-emotional learning training for teachers and administrators. Another one of our schools – PS 152 – saw an 18 percentage point reduction over three years after pairing students who were chronically absent in the previous year with a success mentor at the beginning of the new school year. This Mentor checked in with students one-on-one every day, supported them with academics, provided incentives for attendance, and collaborated with their families to address additional needs.

And, these results are consistent across all schools that implement the community schools strategy. A [2020 report on the New York City community schools initiative](#) found that implementation of the community school strategy is associated with a 7.4 percentage point decrease in chronic absenteeism for elementary school students and an 8.3 percentage point decrease for middle school students— along with higher math achievement, fewer disciplinary incidents, and stronger student connectedness. This resilience was further proven during the pandemic. A recent New York City Public Schools analysis revealed that since 2014, absenteeism in community schools rose by only 4.3 percentage points—less than half the 9.8-point increase seen in non-community schools over the same decade.



Recommendations

We believe that strengthening statewide support for and investment in the community school strategy promises to increase attendance across our state's school system, enhancing academic opportunities for all young New Yorkers. To that end, we urge the state to:

1. Dedicate \$25 million to create and expand community schools statewide.

While the existing foundation aid set-aside for community schools is greatly appreciated, it lacks accountability for how schools implement the strategy. A dedicated funding stream would allow districts, BOCES, and community partners to target investments in essential activities and interventions, particularly in districts without existing resources. This initial investment would be a down payment on the \$100 million needed to fully support high-quality community schools.

2. Provide \$6 million for county coalitions.

We know that dedicated support is essential for effective implementation of community schools. This funding would allow 20 counties to build collective impact locally and provide statewide coordination and technical assistance through the NYS Network for Youth Success and its regional networks.

3. Join the National Chronic Absence Challenge:

Fifteen other states have already committed to this initiative led by Attendance Works, which calls on states to cut chronic absence from pandemic highs by 50% over five years. By joining, New York would demonstrate leadership, gain access to technical assistance and best practices, and strengthen statewide efforts to reduce absenteeism.

Closing

In closing, the community school strategy has proven that it can remove barriers, improve attendance, and strengthen student outcomes—without requiring costly interventions. With enhanced state support for community schools and a commitment to join the chronic absence challenge, we can leverage the full benefits of this strategy, ensuring that all New York children have the opportunity to succeed in school and in life. Thank you again for the opportunity to submit testimony on these critical issues on behalf of children and families in New York State.

Please feel free to contact Annie Nelson, Policy Analyst, at anelson@childrensaidnyc.org with any questions regarding this testimony.