

Reducing Chronic Absenteeism Through Project Based Learning



Across 22 PBLWorks school partners, the majority saw meaningful declines in absenteeism, often outpacing state averages.

Chronic absenteeism—defined as missing 10% or more of enrolled school days—continues to impact student outcomes nationwide. Chronic absenteeism has demonstrated negative impacts on both academic and social-emotional skills of students, especially for students furthest from opportunity.²²³ Chronic absenteeism is complex. Multiple factors contribute to school attendance (i.e., student disengagement, health concerns, lack of access or supports). These factors are even more complicated post-pandemic, and research on effective interventions is limited.

While more research on effective interventions is needed, at PBLWorks, our school and district partners frequently report immediate positive changes in student attendance and engagement as teachers begin to implement Gold Standard Project Based Learning (PBL). This is not surprising feedback! PBL fosters active engagement; students are not merely following instructions, but driving their learning. Quite simply, PBL students WANT to come to school!

To explore this feedback more deeply, PBLWorks analyzed outcomes across its nationwide district partnerships between 2022 and 2025 to explore how Project Based Learning (PBL) may contribute to reductions in chronic absenteeism.

Key Findings:

- 22 partners across 13 states, using publicly available chronic absenteeism data
- 91% (20 of 22) demonstrated a decrease in chronic absenteeism
- 70% of those school districts saw greater decreases than their state average

What We're Learning

These results point to a consistent pattern: when students experience relevant, collaborative, and meaningful learning, they are more likely to attend school consistently.

- Learning is connected to real-world issues, increasing relevance
- Students have voice, ownership, and purpose
- Teachers collaborate across disciplines, creating more coherent learning experiences

What This Looks Like in Schools

At **Ponus Ridge STEAM Academy** in Norwalk, Connecticut, chronic absenteeism dropped dramatically following a focused, schoolwide effort paired with the expansion of Project Based Learning.

“After the pandemic, our absenteeism rate was about 31%... Ponus was at 7.7% in May 2025 and finished the year just above 8%.”

— *Dr. Damon Christopher Lewis, Principal*

While systems and supports played a role, a key shift came as students began experiencing PBL more consistently:

“What also made the difference was when students started experiencing PBL. They wanted to be here. They didn’t want to miss projects or presentations.”

— *Dr. Damon Christopher Lewis*

This pattern is not isolated. At **Jim Bridger Middle School** in Clark County School District, Nevada, similar trends emerged as PBL expanded across the school:

“Chronic absenteeism has decreased significantly, dropping from around 40 percent to the teens... PBL has played an important role in increasing student engagement and making school a place where students want to be.”

— *Ramona Fricker, Principal*

While many factors influence attendance, these findings suggest that Project Based Learning plays a meaningful role in making school a place where students want to be.



Dive into our Evidence Matters research brief, [Want to Boost Student Engagement? Implement Gold Standard PBL](#), and discover how high-quality Project Based Learning leads to deeper engagement and stronger student outcomes.

Want to explore how Project Based Learning can support your school or district goals? [Connect](#) with our team to start the conversation.

1. Aucejo E. M., Romano T. F. (2016). Assessing the effect of school days and absences on test score performance. *Economics of Education Review*, 55(December), 70–8
2. Gottfried M. A. (2014). Chronic absenteeism and its effects on students' academic and socioemotional outcomes. *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk*, 19(2), 53–75.
3. Santibañez, L., & Guarino, C. M. (2021). The Effects of Absenteeism on Academic and Social-Emotional Outcomes: Lessons for COVID-19. *Educational Researcher*, 50(6), 392-400.
4. <https://www.ed.gov/teaching-and-administration/supporting-students/chronic-absenteeism>