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Understanding Chronic Absenteeism and Examining a Strategy to Improve Attendance

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School Climate and Student Attendance in Fulton County Schools

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Background and Motivation

Since the COVID-19 pandemic, chronic absenteeism—when students miss a large number of school days—has risen sharply across the U.S. The reasons why students are absent are often complicated. Many different factors at home, at school, and in the community can shape these reasons. Because these factors vary so much from student to student, there is no single solution that works for everyone.

To better understand why students miss school, we analyzed Fulton County Schools' student climate surveys from the 2021-22 to 2024-25 school years. These surveys ask students about how they feel in their school, covering topics like safety, relationships, and learning environment. By comparing these survey responses with attendance records, this report aims to shed light on the school conditions that may influence attendance. The goal is to help identify strategies that support student engagement and reduce absenteeism.

Research Questions

This study set out to answer three main questions:

1. How much can the student climate survey explain differences in attendance between schools?
2. Which survey topics and specific questions are most strongly linked to attendance rates?
3. How do student survey responses differ in schools with high, medium, and low attendance rates?

Data and Methodology

To answer our research questions, we used two main sources of information: student climate surveys from the 2021-22 through 2024-25 school years and attendance records from the district's administrative data system.

The district gave these surveys once a year to students in Grades 3–5 and separately to students in Grades 6–12. While the main topics stayed the same each year, the district worded some questions slightly differently depending on the grade group or the year.

Because the surveys used different response formats, we adjusted the answers, so they all followed the same five-point scale, ranging from “Strongly Agree” (5) to “Strongly Disagree” (1). The survey grouped the questions into seven categories:

1. **School/District Satisfaction.** Whether students would recommend their school or district.
2. **Positive, Safe, and Welcoming.** Perceptions of overall climate and how respectfully adults treat students.
3. **School Buildings, Safety, and Security.** Bullying, bus safety, and the presence of drugs or alcohol.
4. **Student Support Services.** How well the school supports learning and well-being.
5. **Relationships.** Quality of relationships among students, teachers, and families.
6. **Engagement.** Involvement and connection to the school community.
7. **Learning Environment.** Access to helpful materials, such as books and technology.

We combined the survey results (summarized at the school level) with individual student attendance data. Using statistical models, we looked for patterns between survey responses and attendance rates, while taking into account student demographics and grade level. Because elementary and secondary students take different surveys, we analyzed Grades 3–5 and Grades 6–12 separately.

For our third research question, we also looked closely at three middle schools with very different attendance patterns: one school with one of the lowest attendance rates in the district, one with a moderate attendance rate and a large number of English Learner students, and one with one of the highest attendance rates. By comparing survey answers from these schools, we could see how perceptions of school climate varied across different contexts.

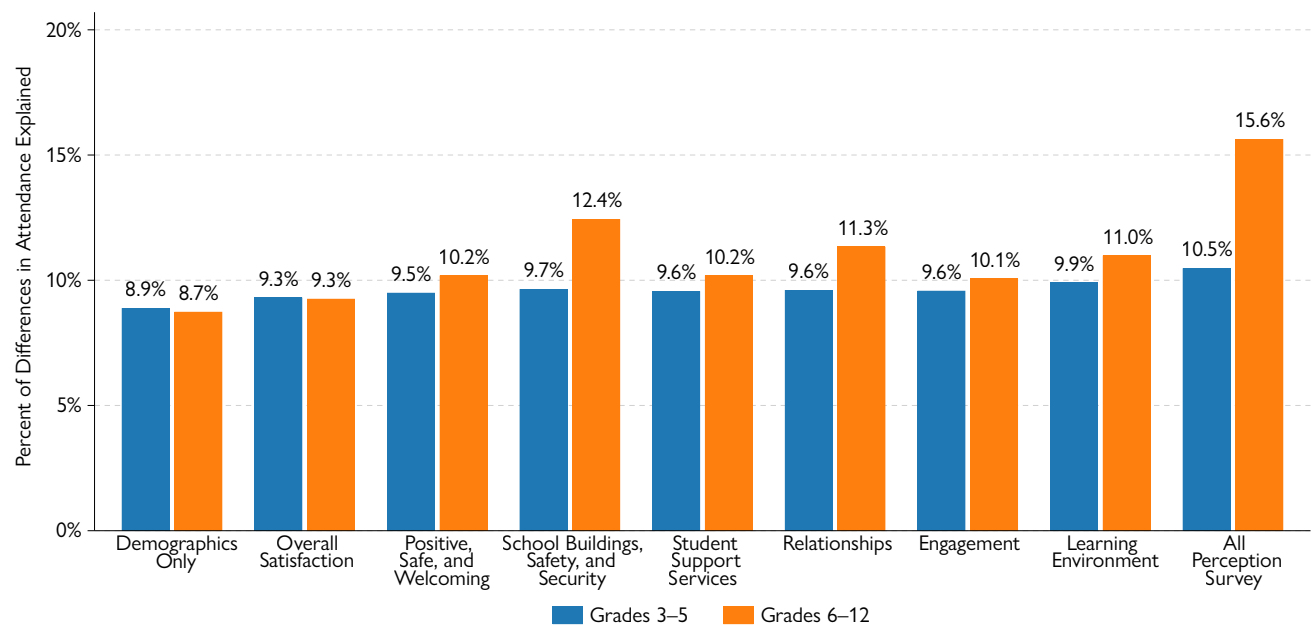
Finding 1: How Much the Survey Explains Attendance

The student climate survey explains only a small part of the differences in attendance across schools. Among all the survey topics, questions about School Buildings, Safety, and Security were most strongly linked to attendance.

Figure 1 shows how much of the variation in attendance can be explained by student demographics (such as grade level, race/ethnicity, and gender) and by the climate survey. For elementary students, demographics alone explained 8.9% of the differences in attendance between schools. For middle and high school students, demographics explained about 8.7%.

When we added the climate survey responses, the explanatory power went up only slightly—to 10.5% for elementary and 15.6% for middle and high school students. This findings means that most of the differences in attendance—nearly 85% to 90%—are still due to other factors not measured by the survey or demographics. In other words, while school climate does matter, it is just one part of a much bigger picture when it comes to understanding absenteeism.

Figure 1. How Much Demographics and School Climate Explain Differences in Attendance



Notes. All results for survey categories shown include student demographics (such as race/ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic status).

Finding 2: Which Survey Topics Are Linked to Attendance

Certain school climate topics, especially the School Buildings, Safety, and Security and Learning Environment categories, were linked to higher attendance, but the connections were modest and varied by grade level.

The survey topics most connected to higher attendance varied by grade level. However, two areas showed a consistent positive link across both elementary and secondary grades: School Buildings, Safety, and Security (e.g., feeling safe on the bus or not seeing weapons at school) and Learning Environment (e.g., having access to technology or afterschool activities).

Looking at survey data from 2021-22 through 2023-24, some topics mattered more for certain grade levels. For Grades 6–12, questions about Student Support Services, such as whether teachers help students with their strengths and talents, were also linked to higher attendance.¹ For Grades 3–5, the relationships between survey responses and attendance were generally smaller.

Not all results matched expectations. For instance, middle and high school students who agreed more strongly with “My school feels like a community” or “My school helps kids with their feelings” actually had lower attendance. This does not mean these supports are harmful; it may reflect that students who struggle with attendance are more likely to notice and value these kinds of support or that the relationships between climate and attendance are more complex than a simple cause-and-effect.

Table 1 summarizes the relationship between each survey question and attendance rates for Grades 3–5 and Grades 6–12. Positive numbers mean that higher agreement with the statement is linked to higher attendance, while negative numbers mean the opposite. While certain aspects of school climate are linked to attendance, these connections are modest, and survey results alone cannot fully explain why some students attend more regularly than others.

Finding 3: Comparing Three Middle Schools

Students in higher-attendance schools tended to report feeling safer, while English Learner (EL) support was rated more positively in schools with more EL students. However, interpretation of survey results is limited by “reference bias,” where students’ answers are shaped by their own experiences and expectations rather than objective conditions.

We looked closely at three middle schools with very different attendance patterns to see how student perceptions might connect to attendance.

School 1 had one of the highest absenteeism rates in the district, with many students missing 10% or more of the school year. Most students qualified for free or reduced-price meals, and almost all identified as Black. School 2 had a moderate absenteeism rate and a large English Learner population. Nearly half of its students were Hispanic, and one-quarter were classified as English Learners. School 3 had one of the lowest absenteeism rates in the district, with most students missing less than 10% of the year. Fewer than one in eight students qualified for free or reduced-price meals, and a large share were White or Asian.

Table 1. Links Between Survey Questions and Attendance Rates, by Grade Group (2021-22 to 2023-24)

Category	Question	Grades 3–5	Grades 6–12
Positive and Welcoming	My school feels like a community.	-0.009*	0.027
School Buildings, Safety, and Security	My experience riding the school bus is positive.	0.008*	0.011
	Students bringing weapons on campus is a problem at my school.	-0.003	-0.035***
	Students in my classes get picked on, teased, or bullied.	0.000	0.029*
Student Support Services	My school helps kids get along better with others.	0.007	0.036**
	My school helps kids with their feelings.	0.001	-0.037**
	My school helps kids with their talents and strengths.	0.003	0.058***
Relationship	My school helps kids with their individual needs.	0.006	-0.041*
	My school teaches me about college and jobs.	-0.023	0.036*
	My teachers treat me with respect.	0.001	-0.046*
	My teachers care about me.	0.010*	0.056***
	Kids at this school treat the staff with respect.	-0.004	0.045***
	My parents/guardians can easily get in touch with my teachers.	0.012**	0.021
Engagement	My teachers tell me how I am doing in school.	-0.009	-0.048***
Learning Environment	My teachers use materials that represent my culture.	-0.005*	-0.005
	I like the afterschool sports and clubs at my school.	0.006***	-0.021**
	My school has good Wi-Fi.	-0.002	-0.013*

Notes. Positive numbers mean that higher agreement with the statement is linked to higher attendance. Negative numbers mean the opposite. We show only questions that have a statistically significant relationship with attendance for at least one grade level.

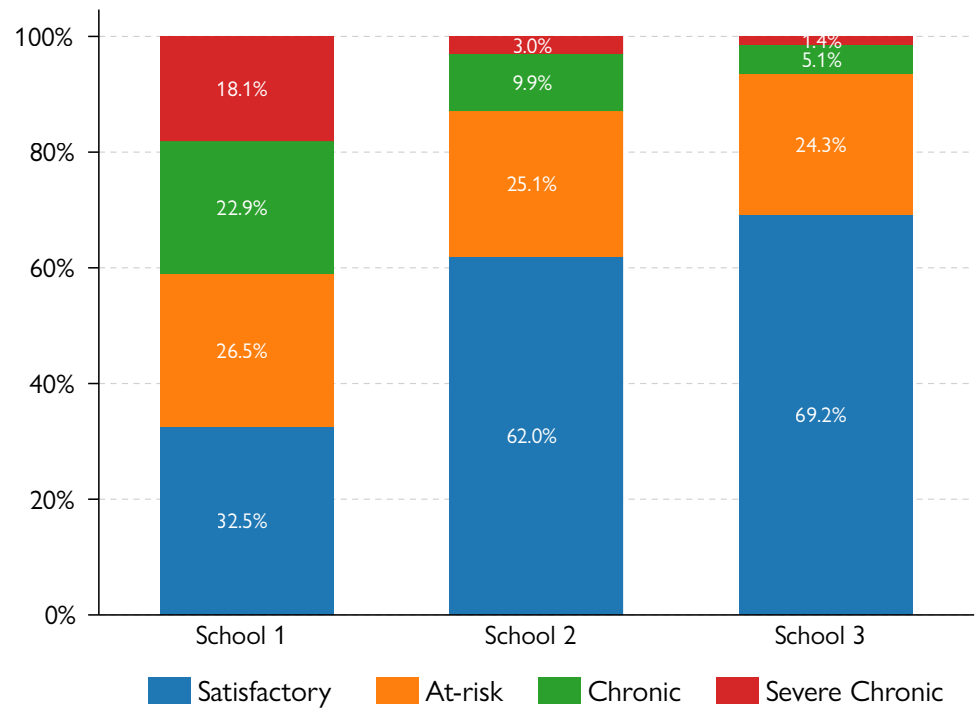
* $p < 0.10$, ** $p < 0.05$, *** $p < 0.01$.

Figure 2 shows the share of students in each school who fell into different absenteeism categories. Table 2 summarizes demographic information for each school, and Table 3 presents average responses to selected survey questions.

A few patterns stand out: Students in higher-attendance schools (like School 3) tended to report feeling safer. Questions about English Learner (EL) support received the highest ratings in School 2, which had the largest EL population. Some results highlight the limits of perception surveys. For example, students at School 1 rated their school's Wi-Fi higher than students at School 3, which likely reflects differences in what students are comparing it to (known as “reference bias”) rather than actual differences in internet quality.

Similar limits may apply to safety-related questions. Students from high-poverty, high-crime neighborhoods may view a moderately safe school environment as

Figure 2. Attendance Patterns in Three Middle Schools



Notes. This figure shows the share of students in each school who fell into different attendance categories from 2021-22 to 2023-24. Fulton County Schools defines these categories as: Satisfactory (absent less than 5.00% of days enrolled), At-risk (absent 5.00–9.99%), Chronic (absent 10.00–19.99%), and Severe Chronic (absent 20.00% or more).

Table 2. Student Demographics in Three Middle Schools

Characteristic	School 1	School 2	School 3
Female	47%	50%	49%
Race and Ethnicity			
White	<1%	26%	41%
Black	92%	21%	10%
Hispanic	6%	46%	10%
Asian	<1%	3%	33%
Multi-Race	2%	4%	6%
Eligible for Free or Reduced-Price Meals	99%	54%	12%
English Learner	2%	25%	4%
Student with an Identified Disability	15%	13%	7%
Attendance Rate (2021-22 to 2023-24)	88%	93%	96%

Notes. Percentages may not sum to 100 due to rounding.

Table 3. Average Survey Ratings (1 = Strongly Disagree, 5 = Strongly Agree) in Three Middle Schools

Category	Question	School 1	School 2	School 3
School Buildings, Safety, and Security	School buses at this school are safe.	3.49	3.48	3.88
	Riding the bus is positive for me.	3.32	3.35	3.46
	Students use or try drugs at school.	2.88	2.63	1.83
	Students at my school use vapes on campus.	2.99	3.07	2.07
	Students come to school with items that could hurt someone.	2.72	2.05	1.57
	Students in my classes get picked on, teased, or bullied.	3.94	3.07	2.74
Student Support Services	My school helps students get along better with others.	2.54	3.17	3.31
	My school helps kids who are first learning to speak English.	3.27	4.13	3.91
	My school helps kids with their feelings.	3.10	3.38	3.44
	My school helps kids with their talents and strengths.	3.49	3.55	3.66
	My school helps kids with their individual needs.	3.18	3.30	3.44
Engagement	My teachers tell me how I am doing in school.	3.98	3.75	3.62
	Does your school send things home written in your family's language?	2.64	3.80	2.90
	My family is involved at my school.	3.35	3.46	3.39
Learning Environment	My teachers make it easy to focus on what I'm learning.	3.03	3.40	3.49
	My school has good Wi-Fi.	3.05	2.85	2.68
	My teachers give me helpful feedback about my work.	3.53	3.58	3.59
	My school has enough computers and other tech tools.	3.35	3.98	4.14
	My school teaches me about real-life things.	3.39	3.43	3.31
Relationship	My teachers treat me with respect.	3.64	3.91	3.96
	My teachers care about me.	3.52	3.81	3.96
	Kids at this school treat the staff with respect.	2.19	2.95	3.25
	Parents/guardians at this school treat school staff with respect.	3.53	4.08	4.24
	My parents/guardians can easily get in touch with my teachers.	3.72	4.04	4.20

Notes. We averaged responses across the 2021-22 to 2023-24 school years. Higher numbers mean stronger agreement with the statement.

very safe, while students from more affluent areas might see it differently, even if the objective safety is the same.²

The main takeaway is that school climate perceptions can vary widely depending on students' backgrounds and experiences, which should be kept in mind when using surveys to understand attendance patterns.

Discussion

This study looked at how student perceptions of school climate relate to attendance in Fulton County Schools. While some climate topics, especially School Buildings, Safety, and Security and Learning Environment, were linked to attendance, the overall connections were modest. Factors outside of the survey results explained most of the differences in attendance between schools.

These findings do not mean school climate is unimportant. Instead, they suggest that the survey's current questions may not fully capture the reasons students miss school. Several challenges make it hard to rely on survey results alone:

- **Unmeasured Factors.** Many things that affect attendance, such as family responsibilities, transportation, neighborhood safety, or immigration concerns, are not addressed in the current survey.³
- **Cause and Effect.** Students who attend more often may be more likely to rate their school climate positively, making it hard to know if climate is driving attendance or the other way around.
- **Survey Participation.** Students with better attendance are more likely to take the survey, which can skew results.
- **Reference Bias.** Students compare their school to their own experiences. For example, a student with limited internet access at home might rate the school's Wi-Fi as "very good," even if the actual quality is average.
- **Different Interpretations.** Students may understand and answer questions in ways that do not line up directly with their attendance behavior.

Suggestions for Improvement

To better understand how school climate affects attendance, future work could take several approaches:

- **Refine Survey Questions.** Ask more targeted questions that directly address known attendance barriers, such as fear of bullying or transportation challenges.
- **Look at Specific Student Groups.** Some questions may matter more for certain groups, such as English Learners or students in specific grade levels.
- **Pair Survey Data with Student Interviews or Focus Groups.** This approach can uncover issues the survey might miss and help interpret responses more accurately.
- **Test Interventions.** Partner with schools to pilot and evaluate strategies aimed at improving attendance for students most at risk of chronic absenteeism.⁴

Understanding how and for whom school climate matters is key to developing strategies that are both effective and equitable. By combining better survey tools with additional data sources, schools can get a clearer picture of attendance challenges and how to address them.

Endnotes

1. This finding is consistent with Schaper, A., Coulter, D., Ugaddan, E., & Woolf, N. (2024). *Understanding the link: The correlation between student mindsets and chronic absenteeism*. Boston, MA: Panorama Education.
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4. Kim and Sass (2025) studied a Bus Recovery Pilot program in Fulton County Schools.
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Bogyung Kim is a graduate research assistant with Georgia Policy Labs. She is currently pursuing a Ph.D. in economics at Georgia State University. She holds a bachelor's degree in economics from Dong-A University in the Republic of Korea.. Her research areas of interest broadly lie in labor economics and public economics. She is interested in gender discrimination in the labor market, the economics of education, and policies on pension system.



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