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Georgia State University | Andrew Young School of Policy Studies

# Attendance Recovery Bus Pilot

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# Motivation and Background

## Motivation

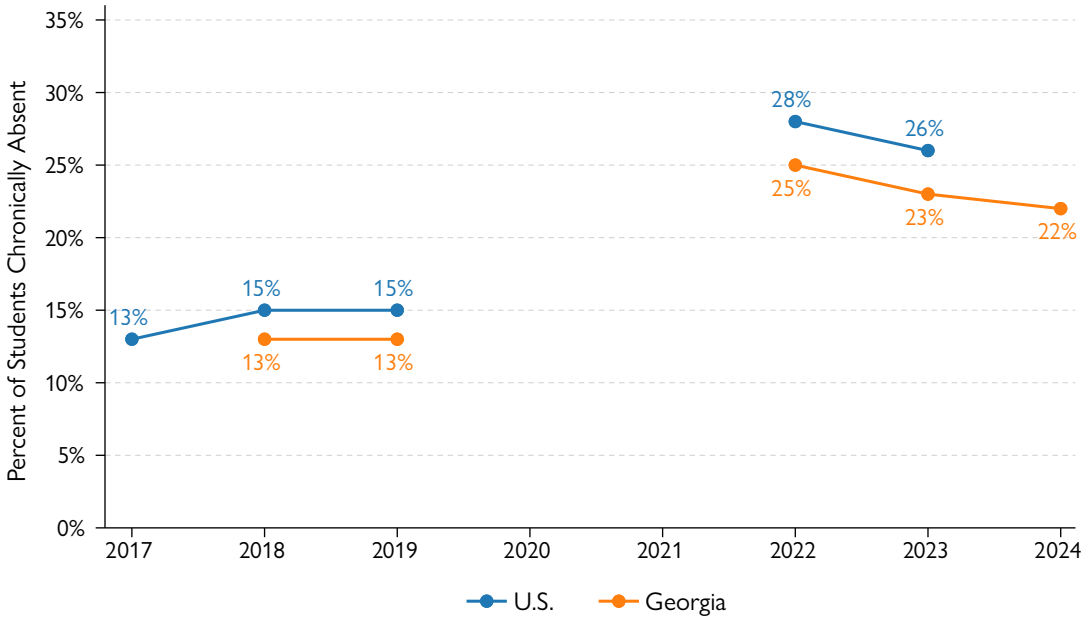
Absenteeism has risen at an alarming rate since the COVID-19 pandemic and remains significantly higher than pre-pandemic norms across much of the U.S. As shown in Figure 1, the proportion of students in the United States who were absent for 10% or more of their enrolled days increased from 15% in school year (SY) 2018-19 to 28% in 2021-22, then declined slightly to 26% in 2022-23. In Georgia, a similar pattern emerged: The share of students absent at least 10% of the time rose from 13% in 2018-19 to 25% in 2021-22, before falling modestly to 23% in 2022-23 and 22% in 2023-24.

As shown in Figure 2, trends in Fulton County Schools (FCS) mirror those observed in Georgia and the nation. Using the district's definition of chronic absenteeism (absent 10–20% of days enrolled),[1] rates were fairly stable pre-pandemic but roughly doubled between 2018-19 and 2021-22. Although rates have declined across all grade bands in the two most recent school years, they remain approximately 50% higher than pre-pandemic levels.

Figure 3 highlights chronic absenteeism patterns across FCS elementary schools. Rates are higher in South Fulton (Zones 1–3), which has lower average household incomes and higher rates of students qualifying for free or reduced-price meals (FRPM)—a common proxy for family income—than North Fulton (Zones 4–7). This pattern is consistent with findings from the National Health Interview Survey, which reported that children in families earning less than 200% of the federal poverty level were more likely to experience chronic absenteeism for health-related reasons than their peers from families experiencing higher income.[2] The cross-zone differences within FCS are substantial: In 2023-24, the chronic absenteeism rate in Zone 1 was four times higher than in Zone 7.

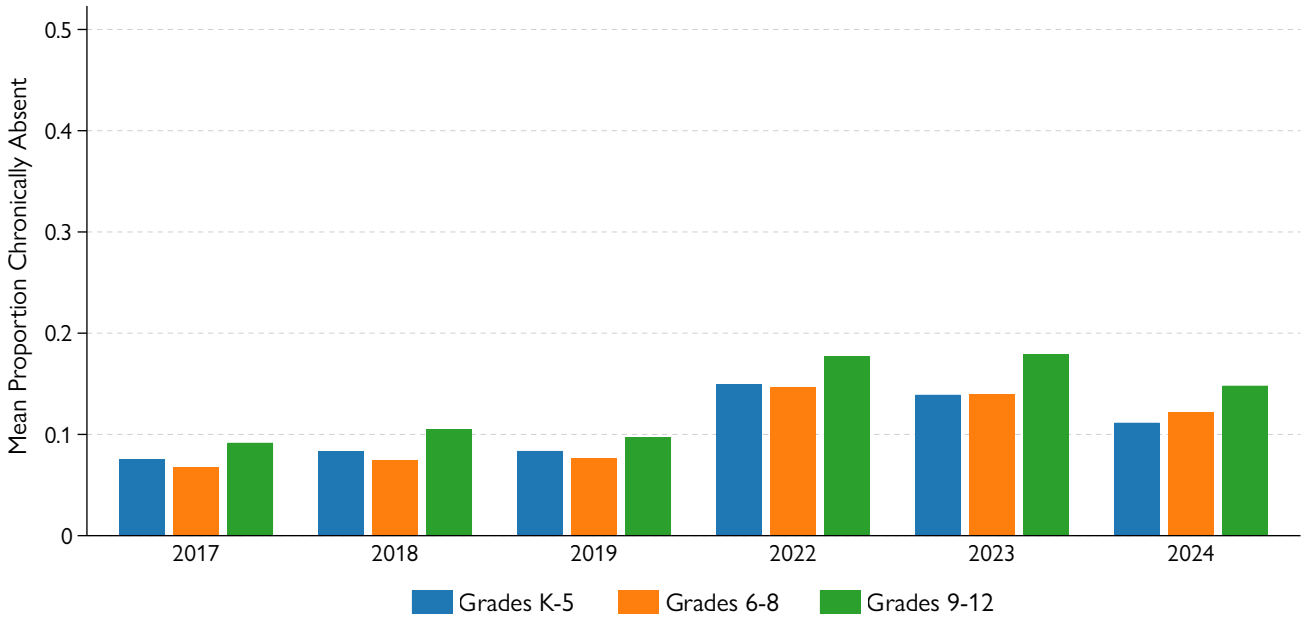
Figure 4 provides school-level data on chronic absenteeism in Zone 1, the area with consistently the highest rates for students in Grades K–5. Although most Zone 1 elementary schools have seen marked improvements since the return to full in-person learning in 2021-22, two schools—School A and School B—stand out for its persistently high rates. In 2023-24, chronic absenteeism at these two schools was roughly 50% higher than the average for other Zone 1 elementary schools. The proportion of students experiencing economic disadvantage (measured by the percent of students that are "directly certified" for free/reduced-priced meals) at these two schools are also among the highest

Figure 1. Chronic Absenteeism Rates in the U.S. and Georgia, 2016-17 to 2023-24



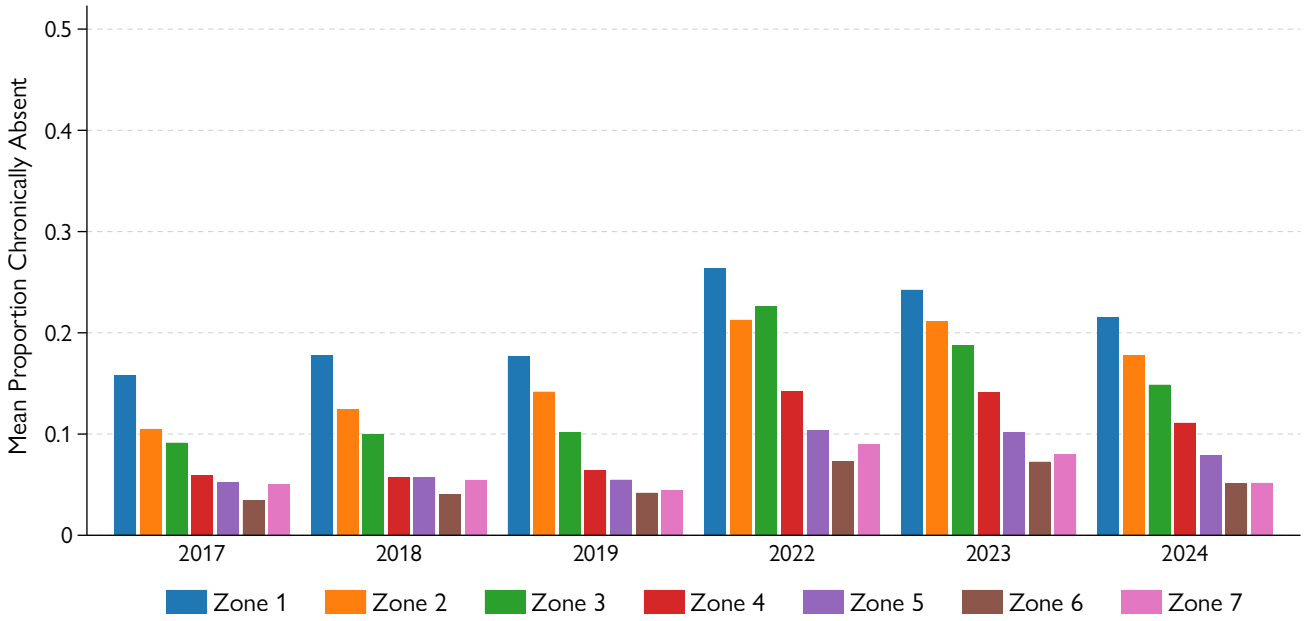

*Notes.* We based the rates on the share of students missing 10% or more of school days. Reliable attendance data is not available for years in which there was remote instruction for at least part of the school year (SY 2019-20 and SY 2020-21).
*Source.* Malkus, N. (2024). *Long COVID for public schools: Chronic absenteeism before and after the pandemic.* American Enterprise Institute. aei.org/research-products/report/long-covid-for-public-schools-chronic-absenteeism-before-and-after-the-pandemic/
Return to Learn Tracker (2025). returntolearntracker.net

Figure 2. Chronic Absenteeism in Fulton County Schools by Grade Group, 2016-17 to 2023-24



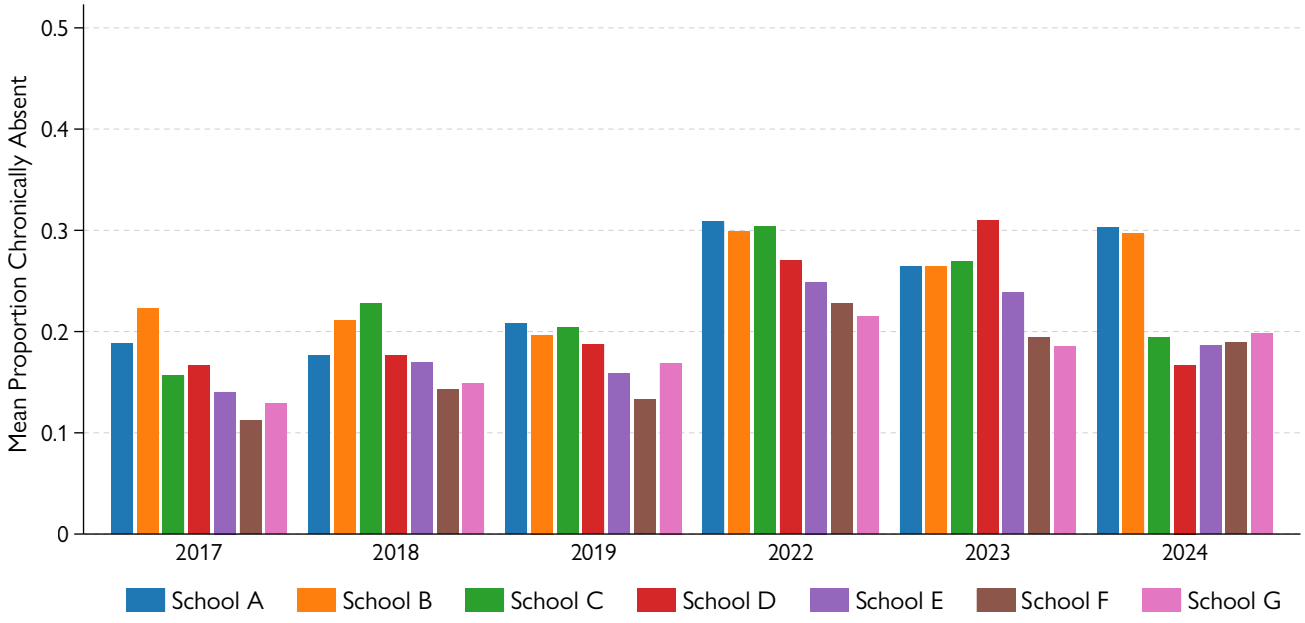

*Notes.* We based the rates on the share of students missing 10% or more of school days.

Figure 3. Chronic Absenteeism Among Elementary Students in Fulton County Schools by Learning Zone, 2016-17 to 2023-24




*Notes.* We show rates for students in Grades K–5 and base them on the share of students missing 10% or more of school days.

Figure 4. Chronic Absenteeism in Zone 1 Elementary Schools, 2016-17 to 2023-24




*Notes.* We base rates on the share of students missing 10% or more of school days.

in the district. In 2023–24, 90% of students at School A and 86% at School B qualified for direct certification (compared to a districtwide average of 40%). This gap highlights the socioeconomic challenges these schools face and contributed to their selection for the Attendance Recovery Bus pilot.

## Background

In response to persistently high absenteeism rates among some Zone 1 students, the Fulton County Board of Education approved a pilot program in January 2025 aimed at improving attendance at School A and School B. The program introduced a second morning bus pickup following the regular 6:00 a.m. route. Under the pilot, each school operated two additional buses that re-ran their regular routes beginning at 9:15 a.m. The goal was to provide transportation for students who missed the early pickup and were absent at the start of the school day.

The district informed families of the program through multiple channels, including Infinite Campus call-out messages, EveryDay Labs attendance texts, and personalized phone calls to parents and guardians of students identified as chronically absent. The district distributed communications from January 13–17, 2025, instructing schools to refer to the service as the "Attendance Recovery Pick-Up" to clarify that it was not intended as students' primary mode of transportation.

The pilot began on January 27, 2025, and ran through May 22, the end of the 2024-25 school year.

The stated goal of the pilot was to reduce daily absences by 20% at each of the two schools. During the first two weeks of the spring semester (January 7–17), School A averaged 36 absences per day, while School B averaged 51. To meet the pilot's target, daily absences would need to fall by 7 students at School A and 10 students at School B.[3]

## Evidence-Based Interventions to Reduce Absenteeism After COVID-19

The surge in chronic absenteeism following the COVID-19 pandemic has prompted renewed interest in identifying effective, scalable interventions. Although limited in number, several strategies have shown promising results. One such strategy involves behavioral "nudges" delivered via personalized letters or text messages to parents alerting them to their child's absences.[4] A

large-scale randomized trial conducted during 2022-23 and 2023-24 across 47 rural districts in 16 states found that personalized messages reduced student absences by 1.7% based on an intent-to-treat estimate (i.e., the effect of being assigned to receive messages when absent) and by 4.5% based on a treatment-on-the-treated estimate (i.e., the effect among those who actually received messages). Results from a subset of districts with high implementation fidelity were similar: 3.1% (intent-to-treat) and 3.5% (treatment-on-the-treated) reductions in absences. The intervention was effective for students who had been chronically absent the previous year and for those eligible for FRPM, but it had no statistically significant effect for students who were not chronically absent or who did not qualify for FRPM. With an implementation cost of just $4.07 per student, this approach appears to be cost-effective.

Early Warning Systems (EWS), which aim to identify and support at-risk students, have shown mixed effects on attendance.[5] A recent evaluation of an EWS in a large urban district used a rigorous regression discontinuity design, comparing students just above and below absence thresholds that triggered interventions. The study found a 1.3-percentage-point reduction in chronic absenteeism for students not eligible for FRPM. However, researchers observed no statistically significant effect for FRPM-eligible students. The authors suggest that structural barriers, such as limited family resources, poor health, and transportation challenges, may hinder the effectiveness of EWS for these students.

The GRAD Partnership, a national initiative operating in 25 states, takes a more comprehensive approach.[6] Its model includes four components: (a) schoolwide efforts to build connectedness through supportive adult and peer relationships and a welcoming environment; (b) a "student success team" that monitors progress and uses a flexible EWS to identify students in need; (c) the delivery of evidence-based interventions that are adjusted based on measured impact; and (d) a focus on developing student-centered mindsets across the school. Districts adopting the GRAD model have seen substantial improvements in attendance. However, early findings lack a comparison group, making it unclear whether these improvements exceed broader post-pandemic trends.

Some post-pandemic interventions not explicitly designed to address absenteeism have shown indirect positive effects on attendance. For example, a high-impact tutoring program implemented in the District of Columbia during 2022-23 reduced absenteeism by 7% during tutoring periods.[7] The program was most effective when tutoring occurred in-school, at least three times per week, and with a low tutor-to-student ratio. Middle school students

and those with extreme absenteeism (i.e., missing more than 30% of school days) experienced the largest effects, with absence reductions of 14% and 7%, respectively.

Similarly, a school-based mental health program in one California district reduced absenteeism, particularly among elementary and Hispanic students.[8] An evaluation of 173 randomly selected students between 2021-22 and 2023-24 found that the program reduced absences by 2.3 days for elementary students and by 1.8 days for Hispanic students. Notably, these effects persisted after students completed the program, suggesting lasting benefits.

## Transportation Access and Student Achievement

The underlying assumption of the Recovery Bus pilot is that a lack of transportation is a key contributor to student absenteeism and that offering a secondary bus service can improve attendance. While the existing research base is limited, there is credible evidence supporting a causal relationship between transportation access and student attendance.

A 2016 survey of more than 4,700 chronically absent middle and high school students across 10 Florida school districts found that transportation issues, such as missing the bus or car trouble, were the most commonly cited non-health-related reasons for being absent.[9] While over 92% of respondents mentioned illness (short-term or chronic), nearly 55% reported transportation as "sometimes" or "usually" a reason for missing school. In contrast, school-related factors, like the perceived value of school, school stress, school climate, and safety or conflict, were cited by just 21% to 39% of students.

Several studies have found that riding the school bus is positively associated with attendance and negatively associated with absenteeism.[10] However, these studies rely on observable characteristics, such as student demographics and school enrollment, to control for confounding factors, which may lead to biased estimates if unobserved student or family characteristics influence both school bus use and attendance. For instance, students from families experiencing higher income may be more likely to drive their children to school and place greater emphasis on regular attendance.

More recent research from Michigan offers stronger causal evidence. A study of the state's 50 largest districts examined student attendance on either side of the walk-zone cutoff that determines eligibility for district-provided bus service. The findings show that eligibility for transportation reduces the likelihood

of being chronically absent (i.e., missing 10% or more of school days) by 1.4 percentage points, equivalent to a 20% reduction. The effects are even larger for students from families experiencing economic disadvantage, who saw a 0.6-percentage-point increase in their attendance rate and a 3.8-percentage point-decline in the likelihood of chronic absenteeism (a reduction of more than 20%).[11]

## Research Questions

This study addresses the following research questions:

1. How many students used the Recovery Bus, and did usage vary based on prior absenteeism or other student characteristics?
2. How successful were personalized outreach efforts by the Recovery Bus schools in encouraging student participation?
3. Did student attendance improve at the Recovery Bus schools as a result of the pilot program?
4. Did access to the Recovery Bus contribute to improved growth in formative assessment scores?

## Data

To answer the research questions, we combine multiple administrative datasets from FCS for 2024–25. In addition to student-level demographic data from standard student record files, we incorporate a variety of "non-standard" files not typically included in the annual student record.

### Individual-level Daily Absence Data (All Students)

These records identify absences, late arrivals, and the associated reasons. For School A and School B, the data also indicate whether a student rode the Recovery Bus. These records allow us to measure Recovery Bus usage and compare changes in absences over time at the Recovery Bus schools relative to other schools in the district.

### Individual-level Daily Absence Notes (School A and School B)

These informal lists maintained by the two pilot schools document personal outreach efforts to parents or guardians of students who were initially absent. When the school made contact, the outcome and stated reason for the absence may be recorded. While not comprehensive, these notes provide insights into school-level outreach efforts and the underlying causes of student absences.

### Individual-level Enrollment Data (All Students)

These data include the start and end dates for each enrollment episode. Students who switch schools during the year have multiple records. Because absence data only capture days when a student is marked absent or tardy, we needed enrollment data to determine which students were enrolled and expected to attend school on each day.

### School-level Daily Attendance Data (All Schools)

These files report the number of students attending each FCS school on a daily basis. We use these data to estimate the overall impact of the Recovery Bus by comparing changes in school-level attendance rates before and after the pilot period and by comparing those changes between Recovery Bus schools and non-pilot schools.

### Winter and Spring i-Ready Formative Assessment Scores (School A and School B)

The district administers i-Ready assessments twice annually to all elementary students: once at the start of the school year (fall) and again around the middle (winter). In addition, School A and School B conduct a third administration in the spring. The participation rate is approximately 90%. We use these data to assess the impact of the pilot program on student achievement growth.

## Methodology

To address the first research question, we generate descriptive statistics, including counts and means, on Recovery Bus ridership and rider characteristics.

For the second and third research questions, we estimate multivariate regression models that control for factors other than Recovery Bus availability that may influence student attendance, absenteeism, or performance on formative assessments.

To estimate the effect of the Recovery Bus pilot on attendance, we use a difference-in-differences approach. Specifically, we compare the change in school-level attendance rates between the pre-pilot period (August 5–January 26) and the post-pilot period (January 27 onward) at the Recovery Bus schools to the corresponding change over time at other elementary schools in the district. This design helps account for the fact that School A and School B already had higher absenteeism rates before the pilot began. If the program was effective, we would expect absenteeism to remain higher at these two schools compared to other FCS elementary schools, but the improvement in attendance should be greater at the Recovery Bus schools than at comparison schools.

For the fourth research question, a difference-in-differences design is not feasible because most non-Recovery Bus elementary schools do not administer spring i-Ready assessments. As an alternative, we estimate a value-added model that compares spring test scores (during the pilot period) to winter test scores (pre-pilot) for students at School A and School B, controlling for baseline performance. This approach allows us to assess whether student growth in the pilot period exceeded expectations based on prior achievement.

## Finding 1: Daily and Weekly Absence Trends

**Daily (and even weekly) absence rates are highly variable. Attendance often fluctuates depending on the day of the week and whether the day falls near a holiday weekend or school break. Absences are especially high during weeks with multiple days off and at the end of the school year.**

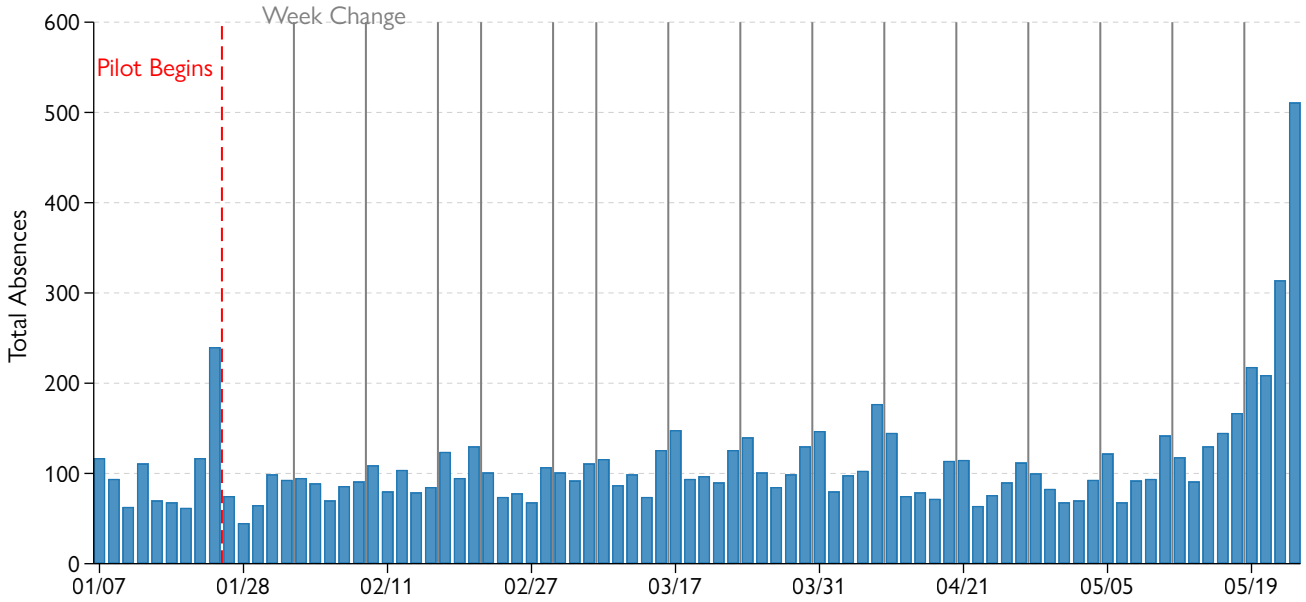
Figures 5–7 show daily absences during the spring semester of 2024-25 for

- School A and School B combined (Figure 5),
- School A only (Figure 6), and
- School B only (Figure 7).

Two patterns emerge consistently across all three figures. First, there are clear differences in absences by day of the week: Absences are generally higher on Mondays and Fridays and lower mid-week. This pattern suggests that some absences may be driven by family scheduling decisions rather than illness. Second, absences increase sharply in the final two weeks of the school year, peaking on the last two days. These patterns highlight the importance of caution when interpreting changes in daily absence counts.

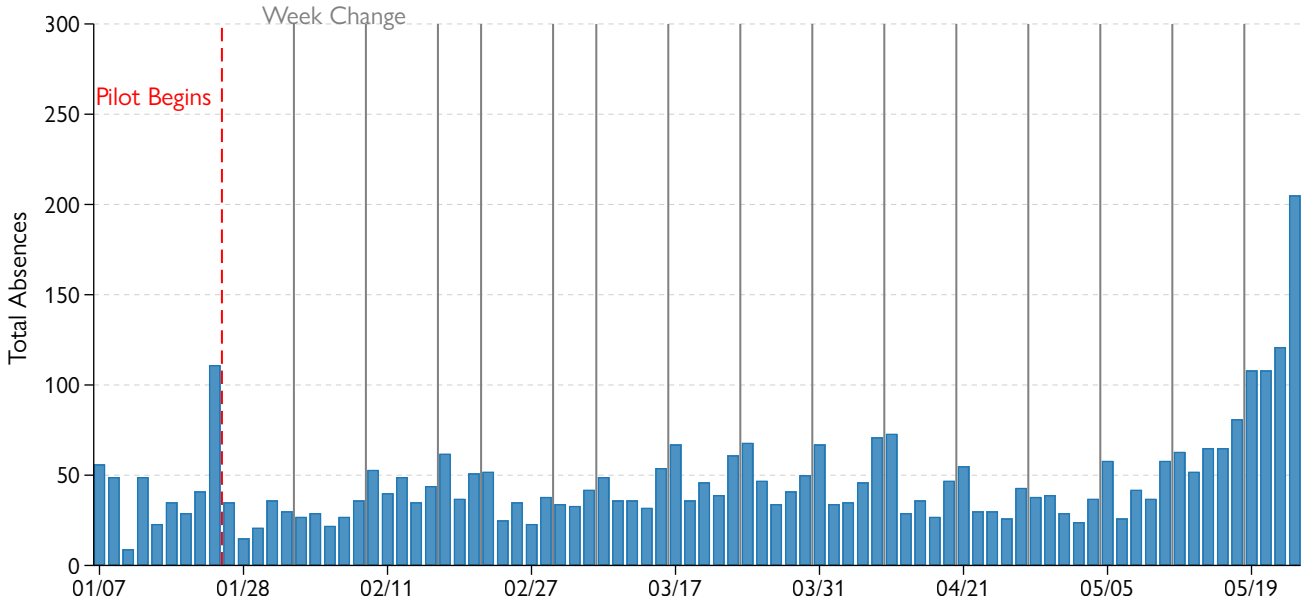
To account for this volatility, Figures 8–10 present weekly average absences across the full school year for the same school groupings. Weekly averages help smooth day-to-day fluctuations but still reveal several notable spikes, particularly in weeks with shortened schedules (e.g., three days off in weeks 5 and 11 and partial or full closures in week 25), and again in the final week of school (week 42).

## Figure 5. Daily Absences at School A and School B, Spring 2025



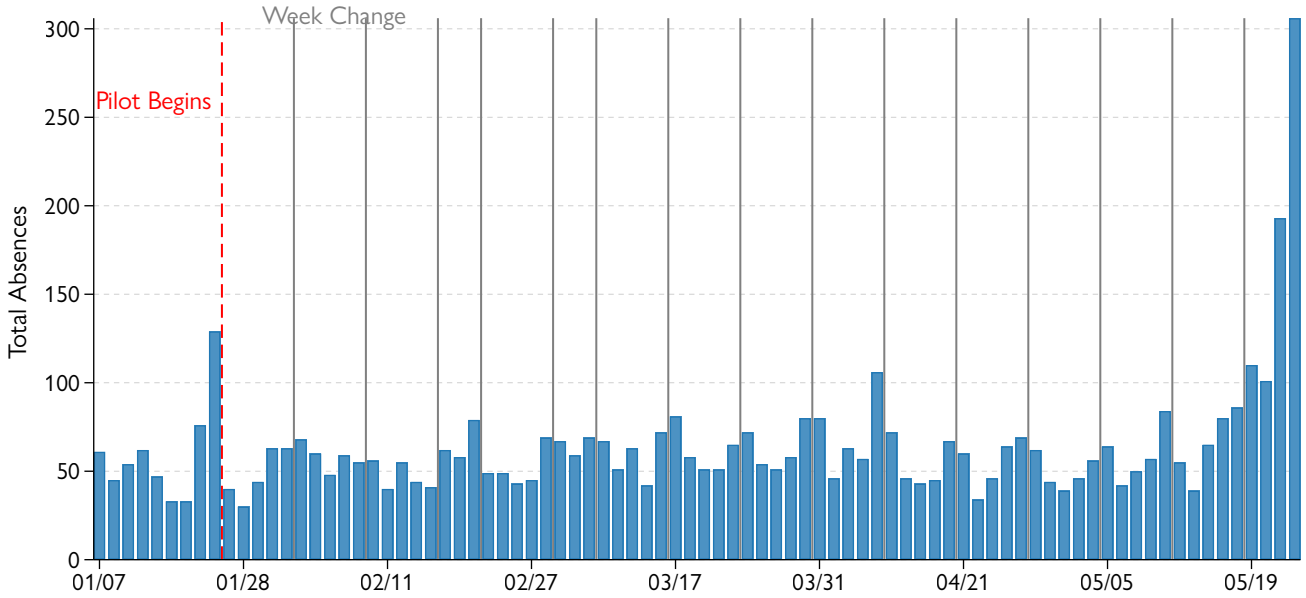

*Notes.* January 20 was a holiday, schools were closed January 21 due to inclement weather, January 22 was a remote learning day, and south FCS schools were on a two-hour delay on January 23. Hence, January 24 was the only full in-person day in the week prior to the initiation of the Recovery Bus pilot.

## Figure 6. Daily Absences at School A, Spring 2025



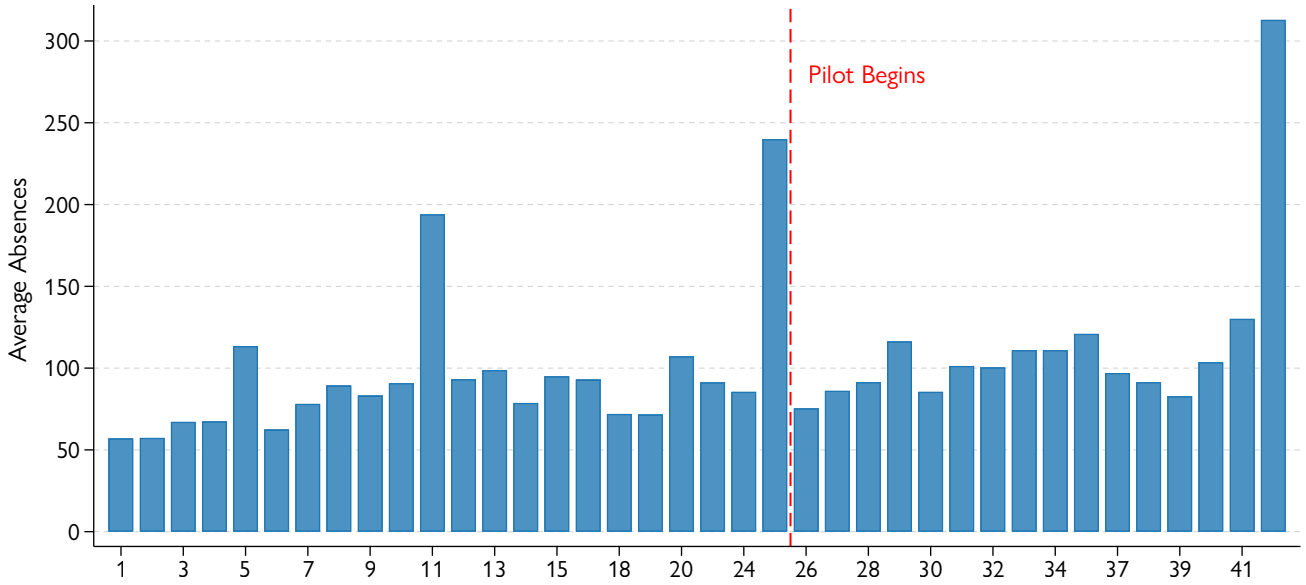

*Notes.* January 20 was a holiday, schools were closed January 21 due to inclement weather, January 22 was a remote learning day, and south FCS schools were on a two-hour delay on January 23. Hence, January 24 was the only full in-person day in the week prior to the initiation of the Recovery Bus pilot.

## Figure 7. Daily Absences at School B, Spring 2025



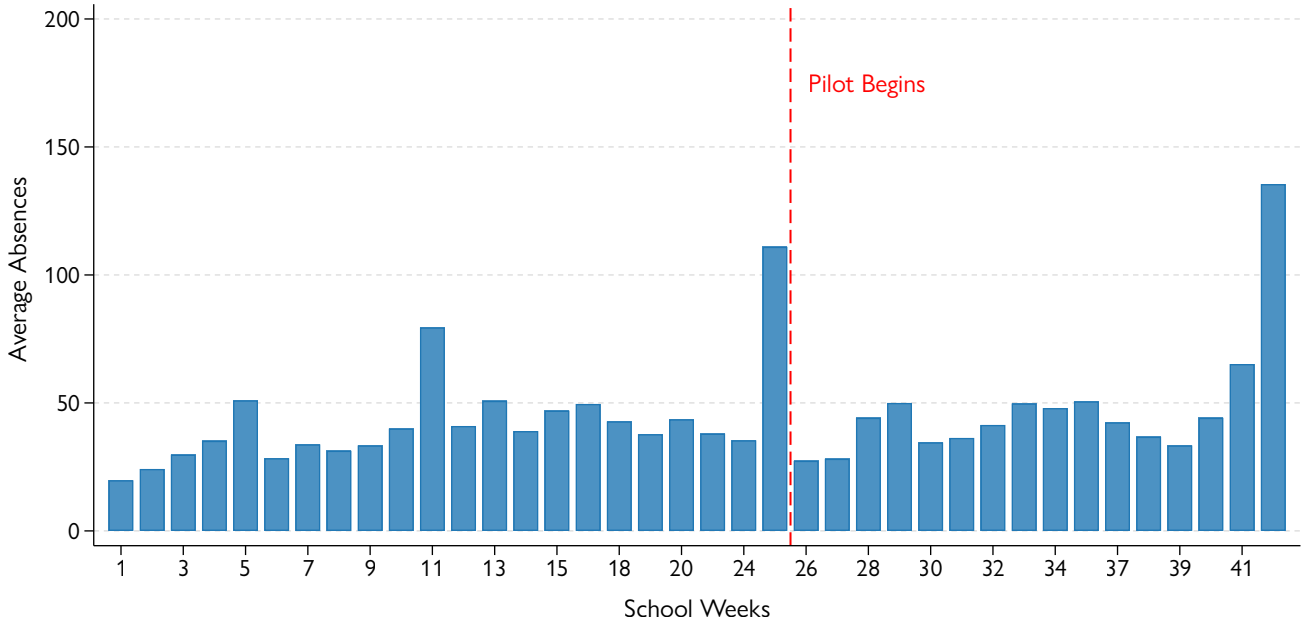

*Notes.* January 20 was a holiday, schools were closed January 21 due to inclement weather, January 22 was a remote learning day, and south FCS schools were on a two-hour delay on January 23. Hence, January 24 was the only full in-person day in the week prior to the initiation of the Recovery Bus pilot.

## Figure 8. Weekly Absences at School A and School B, 2024-25



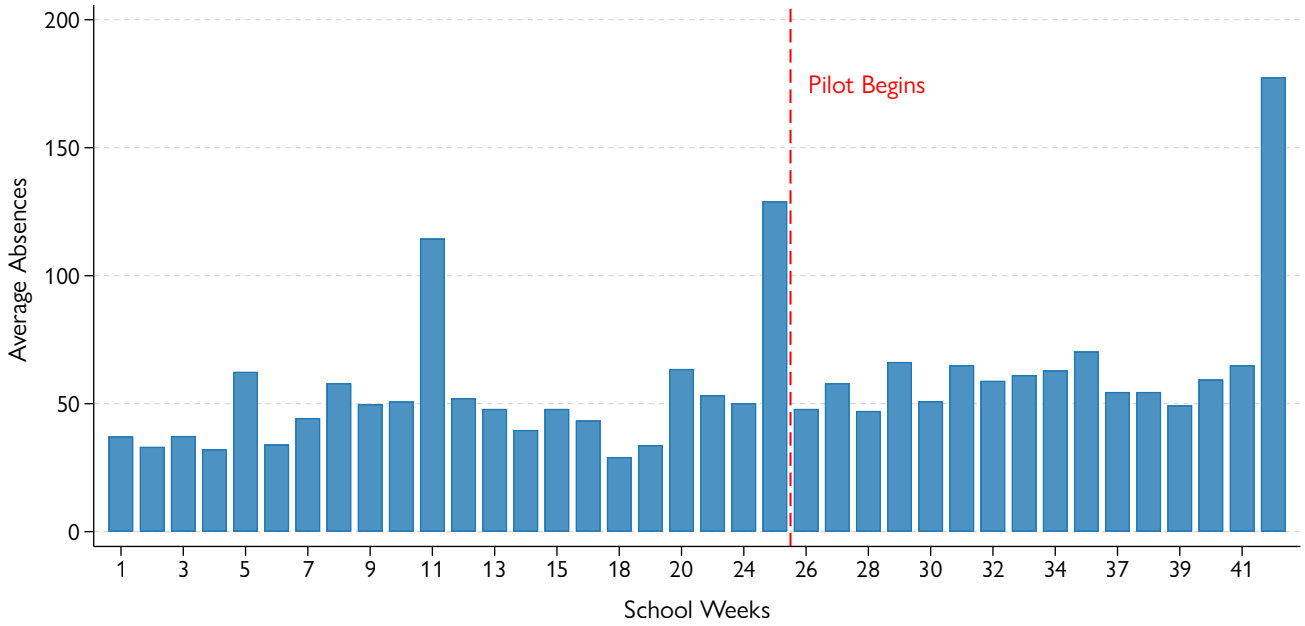

*Notes.* Students were off the first 3 days of week 5 due to the Labor Day holiday, a teacher workday, and a professional development day. Likewise, the first three days of week 11 were "fall break," and school was closed on four days of week 25. Some families may have chosen to travel the remainder of these weeks, leading to a greater number of absences.

## Figure 9. Weekly Absences at School A, 2024-25




*Notes.* Students were off the first 3 days of week 5 due to the Labor Day holiday, a teacher workday, and a professional development day. Likewise, the first three days of week 11 were "fall break," and school was closed on four days of week 25. Some families may have chosen to travel the remainder of these weeks, leading to a greater number of absences.

## Figure 10. Weekly Absences at School B, 2024-25




*Notes.* Students were off the first three days of week 5 due to the Labor Day holiday, a teacher workday, and a professional development day. Likewise, the first 3 days of week 11 were "fall break," and school was closed on four days of week 25. Some families may have chosen to travel the remainder of these weeks, leading to a greater number of absences.

## Finding 2: Recovery Bus Ridership

**Recovery Bus ridership patterns mirror overall absence trends to some degree, with daily usage fluctuating substantially and peaking on the first school day of the week. Ridership is generally low compared to the number of students with unexcused absences, suggesting that many absent students are either unable or unwilling to take advantage of the Recovery Bus option. Daily variation in use—both across and within schools—underscores the importance of interpreting ridership data in context.**

Figure 11 shows total daily Recovery Bus ridership at School A and School B combined. As with absences, usage varied considerably from day to day. Ridership was typically higher on the first school day of the week, particularly in the shortened week following Presidents' Day (February 17) and the professional development day (February 18). Mid-week spikes also occurred, though not always in conjunction with identifiable events. A notable pattern is the relatively consistent and robust ridership observed throughout April, followed by more sporadic and infrequent use in May, the final month of the school year.

Figures 12 and 13 present daily Recovery Bus ridership for School A and School B individually. Through April, School A experienced far more low-ridership days (0–1 riders) than School B. Ridership at School A was also more volatile, with some days seeing four times as many riders as the previous day.

Schools mark Recovery Bus riders as "tardy" rather than "absent" if they attend the remainder of the school day. Because excused absences (e.g., illness) generally preclude riding the Recovery Bus, ridership is more likely to reflect patterns in unexcused absences. Figures 14–16 present daily Recovery Bus ridership alongside unexcused absences for

- School A and School B combined (Figure 14),
- School A only (Figure 15), and
- School B only (Figure 16).

Figure 11. Daily Recovery Bus Riders at School A and School B, Spring 2025

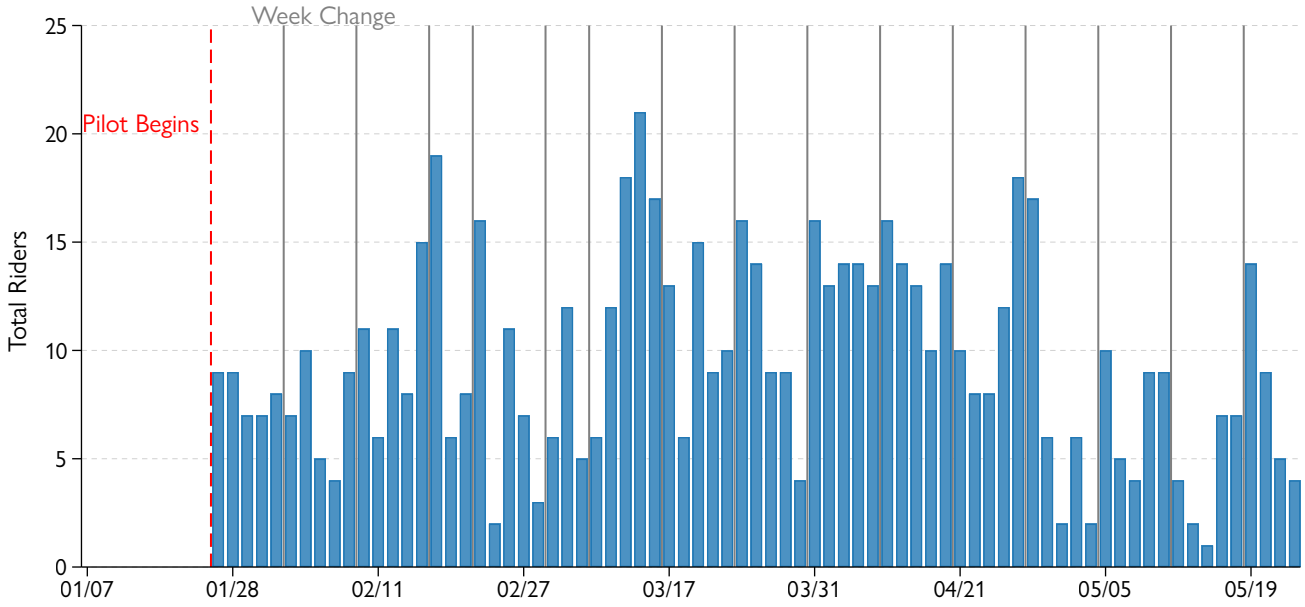



Figure 12. Daily Recovery Bus Riders at School A, Spring 2025

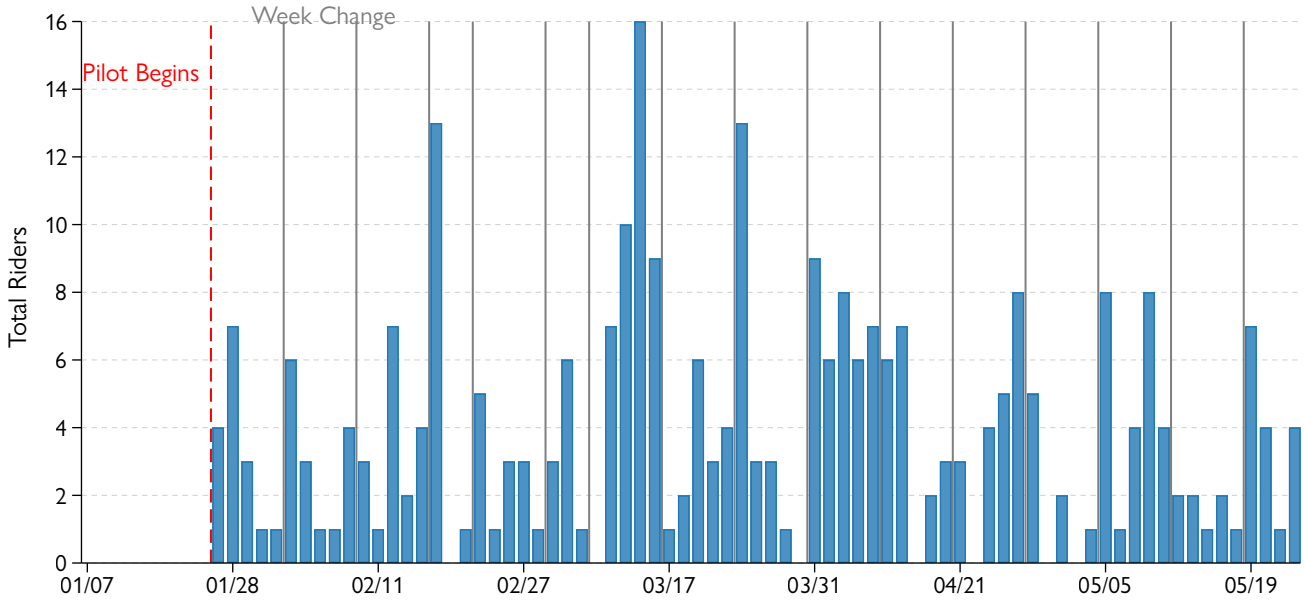


Figure 13. Daily Recovery Bus Riders at School B, Spring 2025

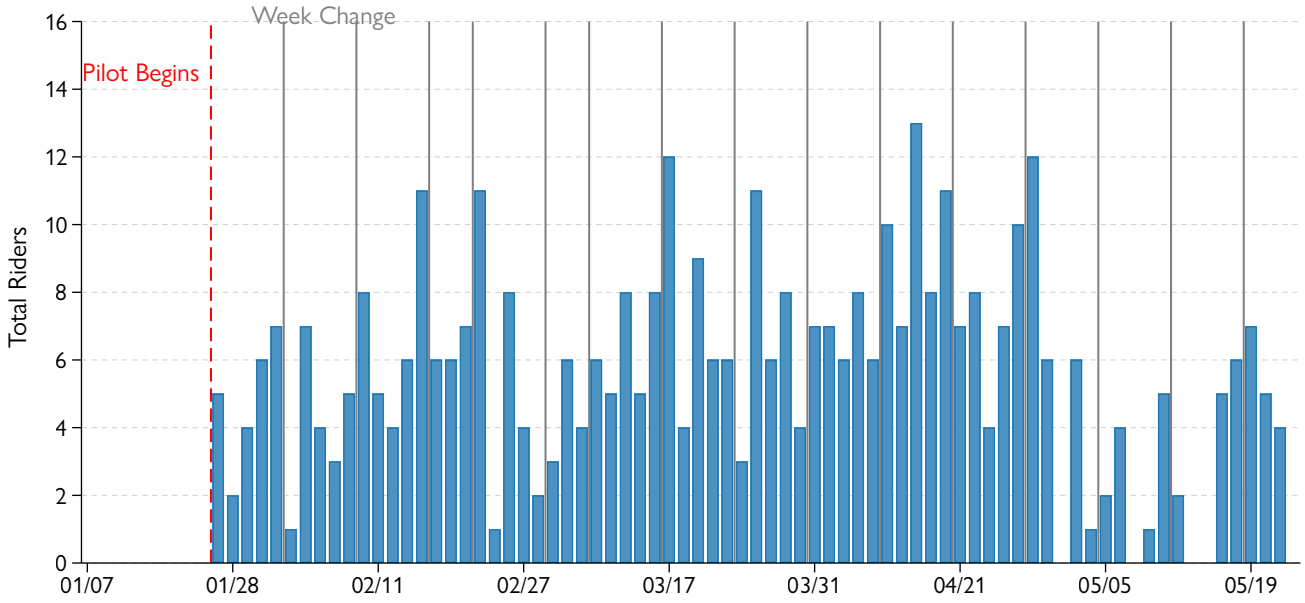



Figure 14. Unexcused Absences and Recovery Bus Riders at School A and School B, Spring 2025

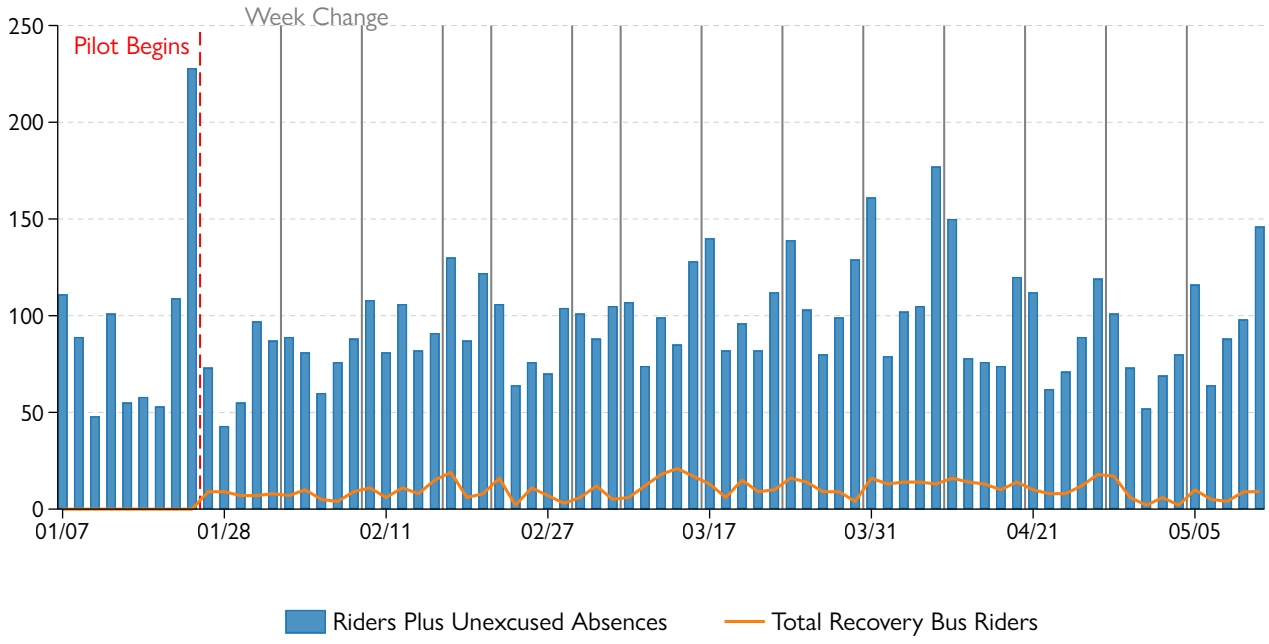


Figure 15. Unexcused Absences and Recovery Bus Riders at School A, Spring 2025

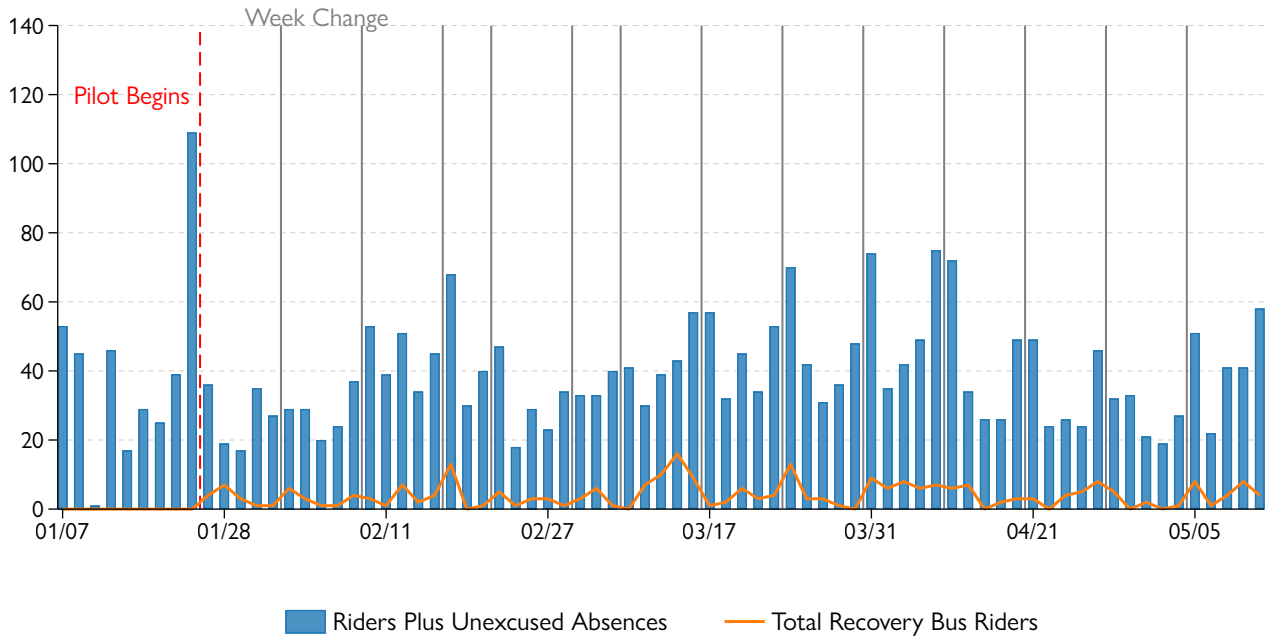
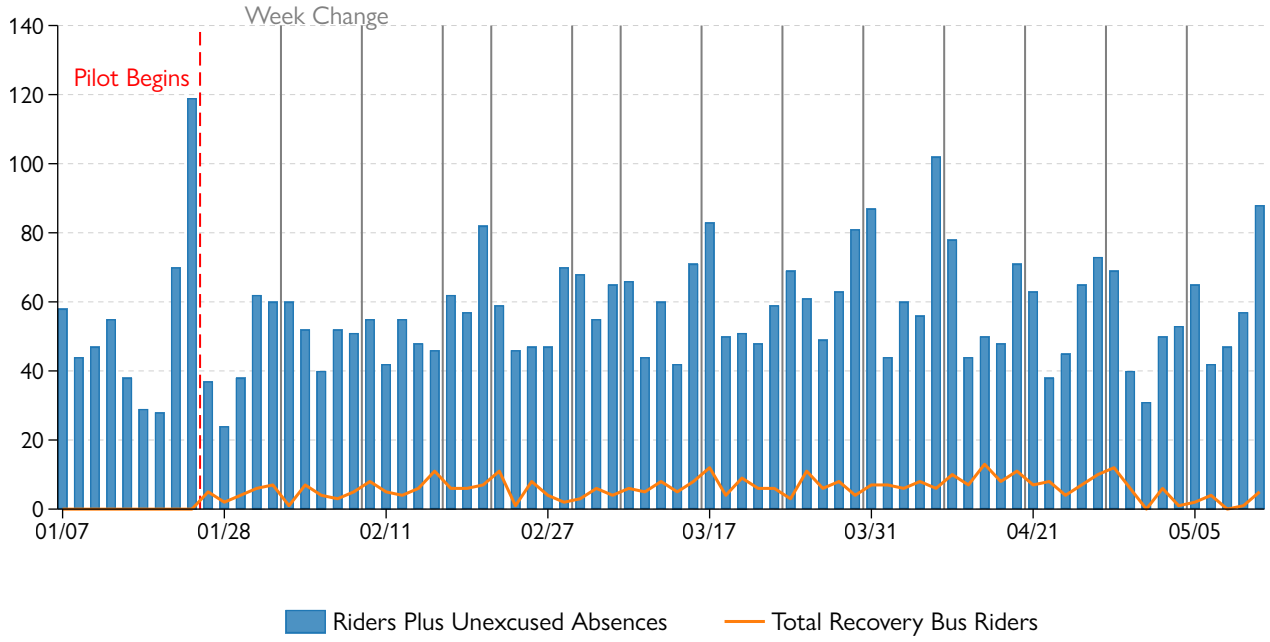



Figure 16. Unexcused Absences and Recovery Bus Riders at School B, Spring 2025



To avoid distortion from end-of-year absenteeism, we excluded the final two weeks of data from these figures. Supplementary figures that include the final two weeks—and versions comparing Recovery Bus ridership with total (rather than unexcused) absences—are available in the appendix.

Across all comparisons, the number of students riding the Recovery Bus is small relative to the number with unexcused absences on a given day. This finding suggests that many students are either opting not to use the Recovery Bus or their absences are unrelated to transportation barriers.

## Finding 3: Distribution of Recovery Bus Use

Only a small fraction of students at the two pilot schools used the Attendance Recovery Bus. Of the 1,480 students ever enrolled at School A and School B during the school year, just 136 (about 9%) rode the Recovery Bus at least once. Roughly one-third of these students used the bus only once, while another third rode five or more times. Recovery Bus usage was strongly associated with pre-pilot absenteeism. Non-users were far more likely to have had "satisfactory" attendance before the pilot began, while users were more likely to fall into the "chronic absenteeism" category. There were no meaningful differences in pre-pilot absenteeism between lighter Recovery Bus users and heavier Recovery Bus users.

As shown in Panel A of Table 1, the 136 Recovery Bus riders accounted for 716 total rides during the 16-week pilot period. Usage was unevenly distributed:

- about one-third of riders used the bus only once,
- another third used it two to four times, and
- the remaining third used it five or more times.

Panels B and C break this usage down by school. Infrequent ridership was more common at School B, where over 40% of users rode the bus only once. In contrast, fewer than 25% of users at School A were one-time riders, indicating a somewhat more consistent pattern of usage.

Table 2 presents ridership patterns by pre-pilot absenteeism. Students who did not use the Recovery Bus were far more likely to have had satisfactory attendance between the start of the school year and the pilot launch on January 27. Conversely, Recovery Bus users were disproportionately represented in the "chronic absenteeism" category prior to the pilot. Among bus riders, there was little variation in pre-pilot absenteeism between lighter and heavier users.

Table 1. Distribution of Riders by Total Numbers of Recovery Bus Rides (January 27–May 22, 2025)

| Panel A: School A and B Combined (716 total rides) | | Panel B: School A (294 total rides) | | Panel C: School B (422 total rides) | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Total Rides | Number of Riders | Total Rides | Number of Riders | Total Rides | Number of Riders |
| 1 | 46 | 1 | 14 | 1 | 32 |
| 2 | 22 | 2 | 14 | 2 | 8 |
| 3 | 14 | 3 | 6 | 3 | 8 |
| 4 | 10 | 4 | 6 | 4 | 4 |
| 5 | 4 | 5 | 1 | 5 | 3 |
| 6 or more | 40 | 6 or more | 18 | 6 or more | 22 |
| Any | 136 | Any | 59 | Any | 77 |
| Average number of rides per rider: 5.26 | | Average number of rides per rider: 4.98 | | Average number of rides per rider 5.48 | |

Table 2. Pre-Pilot Absenteeism (Before January 27) in SY 2024-25 by Recovery Bus Usage (School A and School B Combined)

| Total Rides | Number of Students | Percent "Satisfactory" | Percent "At Risk" | Percent "Chronic" | Percent "Severe Chronic" |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 0 | 1,344 | 62.43 | 24.11 | 10.93 | 2.52 |
| 1–2 | 68 | 42.64 | 32.35 | 20.58 | X |
| 3 or more | 68 | 44.11 | 30.88 | 17.64 | X |

*Notes.* Sample includes all students who were enrolled in one of the two pilot schools for at least one day in SY 2024-25 (1,480 students). X = cell size less than 10 students.

## Finding 4: Outreach to Families of Initially Absent Students

**Both pilot schools began the Attendance Recovery Bus program with personalized outreach efforts to the families of students who were initially absent. However, these efforts declined sharply after the first week or two and became increasingly sporadic. The documentation of outreach was ad hoc and inconsistent, limiting our ability to determine the reasons for absences or to assess the impact of these outreach efforts on Recovery Bus usage or student attendance.**

In addition to the district's standard automated messages, both School A and School B initiated personal outreach to understand the reason for each student's absence and to encourage Recovery Bus use. Each school maintained informal tallies of these efforts, but the documentation was unstandardized. Staff recorded open-ended notes without consistent labeling of the outreach type, parental response, or absence reason. Notably, School A provided no contact notes after March 7. It is unclear whether outreach efforts ended at that time or if record-keeping simply stopped. Because personalized outreach required additional staff capacity, the decline in effort may reflect limited resources.

Figures 17 and 18 show daily contact attempt rates for each school. At School A (Figure 17), contact rates were very high during the first week of the pilot but declined quickly. By the third week, the school attempted outreach for fewer than 30% of initially absent students, with rates continuing to fall over time. At School B (Figure 18), outreach efforts followed a different pattern. When outreach occurred, it typically reached most initially absent students that day. However, contact attempts became intermittent after the first week, with gaps of several days (or longer) where the school recorded little or no outreach.

Figure 19 summarizes overall contact attempt rates. Across the full pilot period, the schools attempted personalized outreach for fewer than 30% of initially absent students. Among those attempts, School B had a higher parent/guardian contact rate (about 80%) compared to School A (around 60%).

Figure 17. Personalized Outreach to Initially Absent Students at School A, by Day

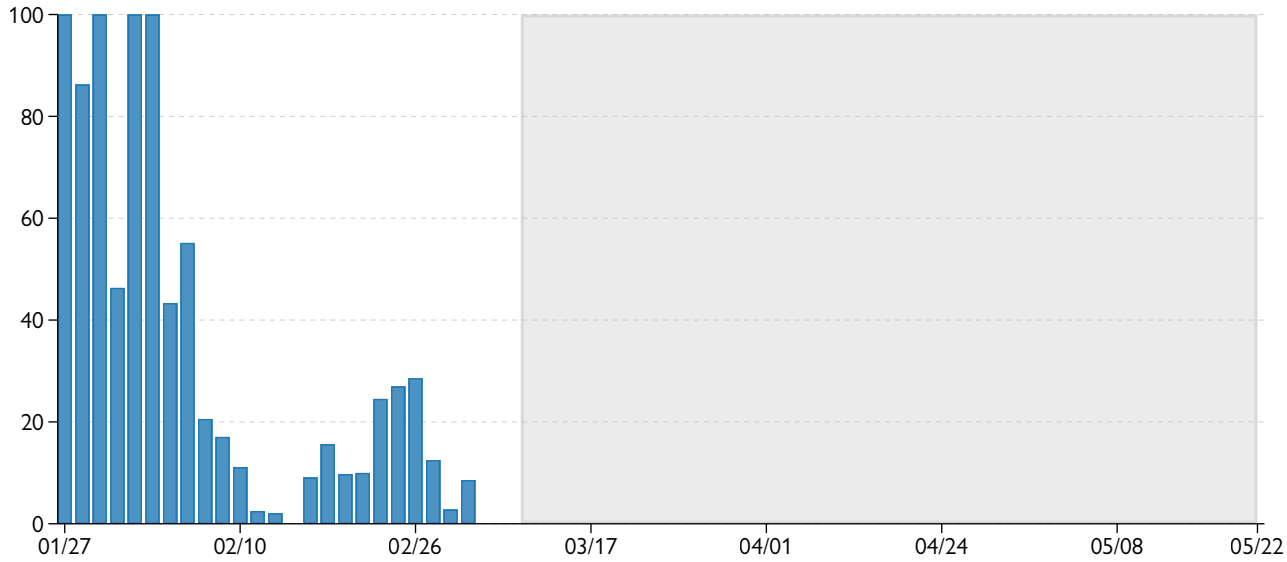



Figure 18. Personalized Outreach to Initially Absent Students at School B, by Day

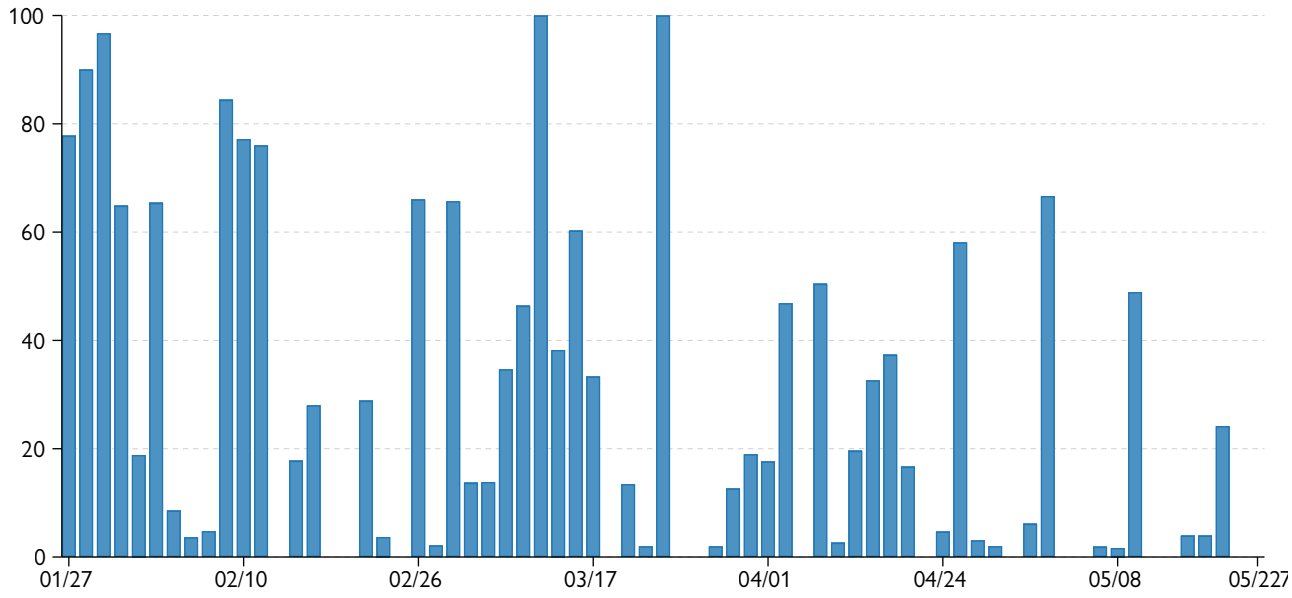
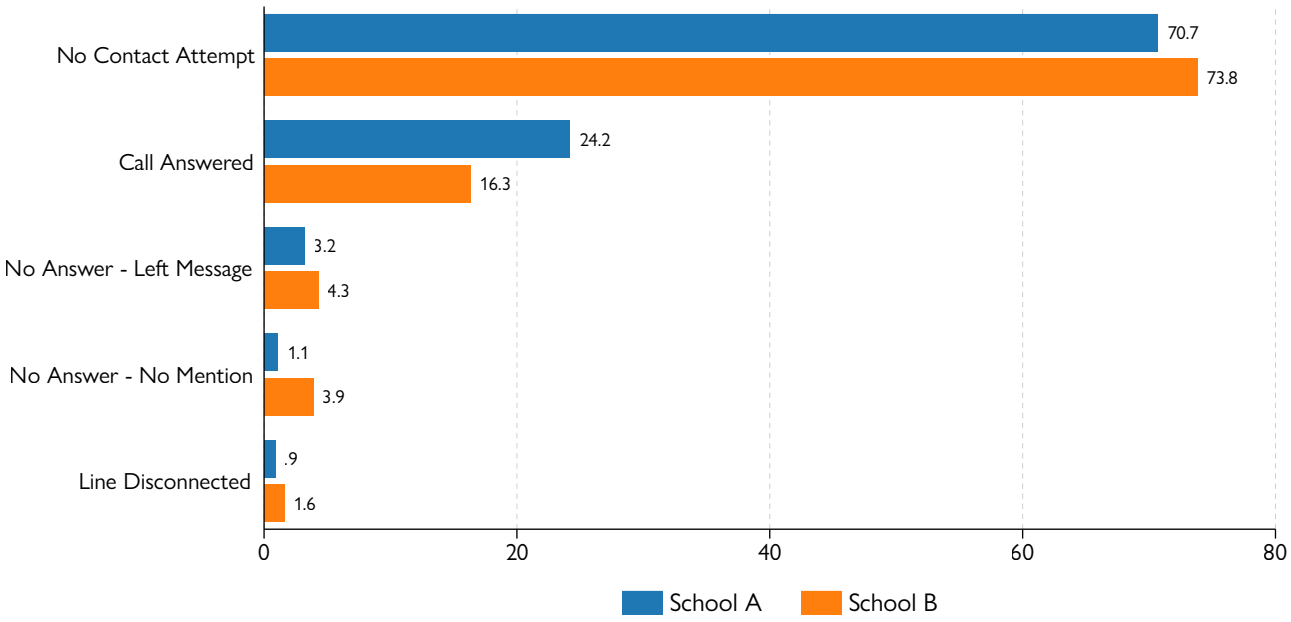


Figure 19. Responses to Personalized Outreach by School




Figures 20 and 21 provide breakdowns of the stated reasons for absence, based on responses collected during successful outreach. If the school attempted no contact, the reason is marked as "Missing." As noted above, School A's data cover only through March 7, while School B's data extend through the end of the school year (with some gaps).

Both schools attempted no contact in roughly three-quarters of all absence cases. Among cases where the schools recorded a reason, responses varied widely. Only a small share of parents or guardians identified transportation as the reason for absence:

- At School A, 1.6 of 27.1 recorded responses (about 6%) cited transportation.
- At School B, 0.5 of 26.2 responses (about 2%) did so.

While these figures likely understate the role of transportation (given limited outreach and underreporting), they suggest that student absences stem from a wide range of causes. Transportation access may be a contributing factor, but it is only one piece of the broader absenteeism puzzle.

Figure 20. Reported Reasons for Absences at School A, January–March 2025

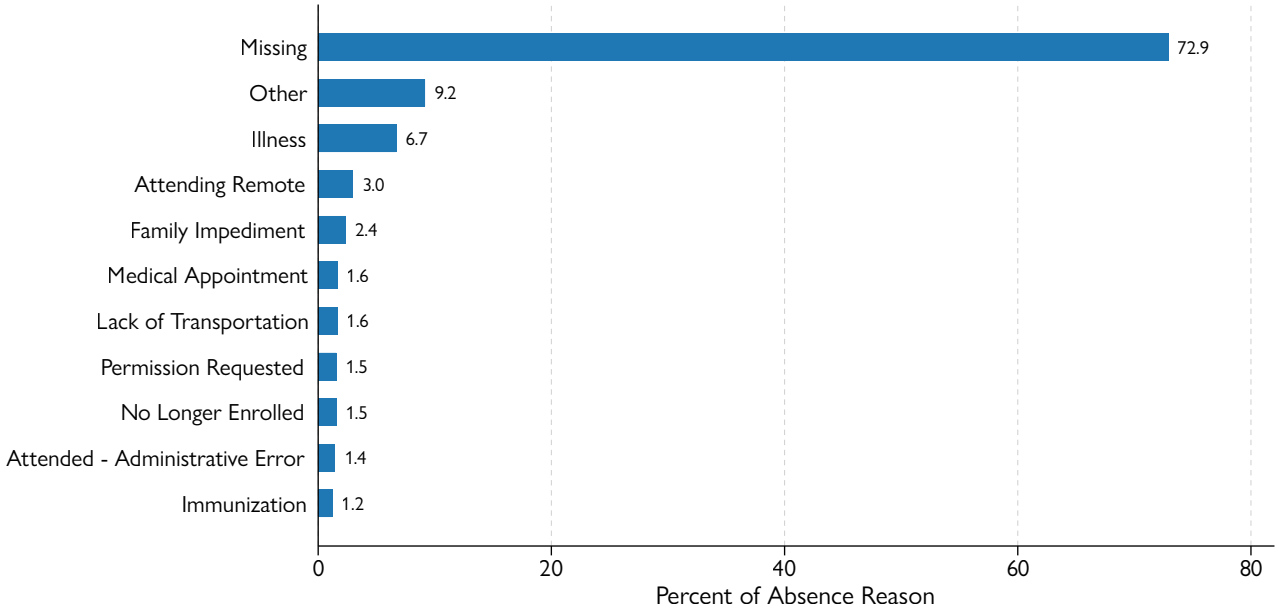
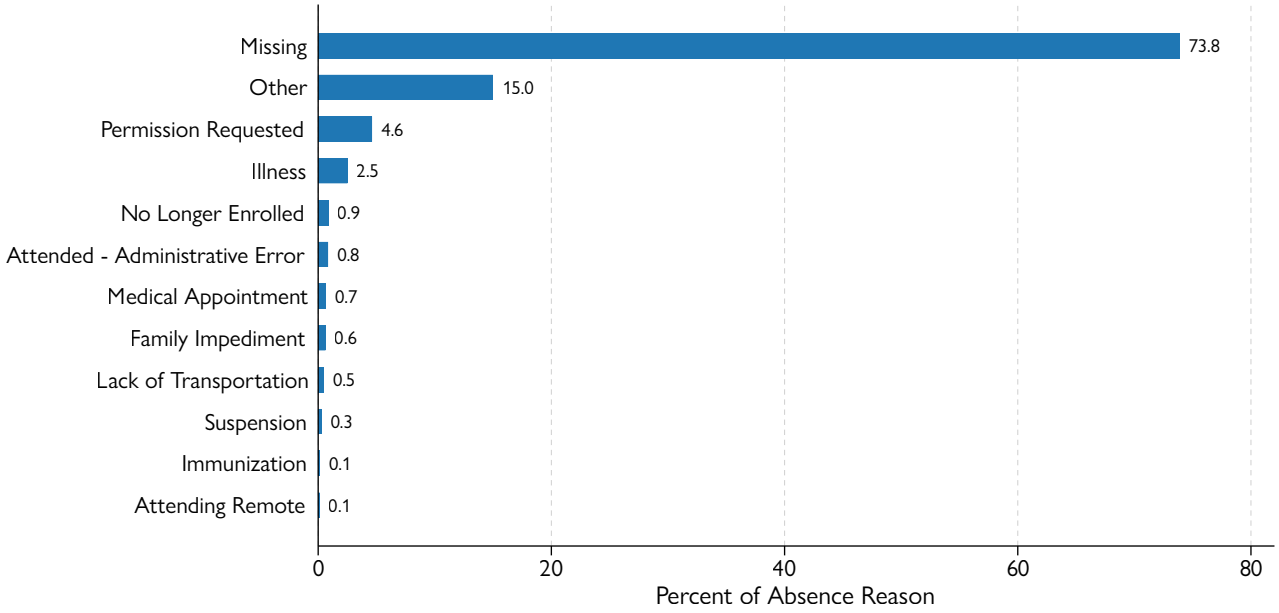



Figure 21. Reported Reasons for Absences at School B, January–May 2025



## Finding 5: Pilot Goals and Absenteeism Trends

**The district set ambitious goals for the Attendance Recovery Bus pilot, aiming to reduce absence rates by 20% at both pilot schools. While each school saw modest improvements in attendance, neither met the 20% reduction target.**

Table 3 presents average daily absence rates during the first two weeks of the spring semester (the pre-pilot baseline) and the corresponding reduction goals.

- School A began with a higher baseline absence rate of 10.4%, yielding a target of 8.3%.
- School B started at 9.2%, with a goal of reducing absences to 7.4%.

Both schools made initial progress. During the first month of the pilot, average daily absences fell to 8.6% at School A and to 8.5% at School B. However, the schools did not sustain these early gains. By March, average daily absence rates had returned to pre-pilot levels. Attendance improved only slightly in April and early May, falling short of the 20% reduction target at both schools.

Table 3. Pre-Pilot Absence Rate, Goal, and Actual Absence Rates by School and Month

| School | Avg. Daily Absence Rate (Jan. 7–17) | Goal (20%-Lower Absence Rate) | Average Daily Absences During Pilot | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | | Jan. 27–Feb. 28 | Mar. 1–Mar. 31 | Apr. 1–Apr. 30 | May 1–May 9 |
| School A | 10.4% | 8.3% | 8.6% | 10.6% | 9.9% | 9.7% |
| School B | 9.2% | 7.4% | 8.5% | 9.4% | 9.0% | 9.1% |

*Notes.* We omitted the last two weeks of the school year from the May average.

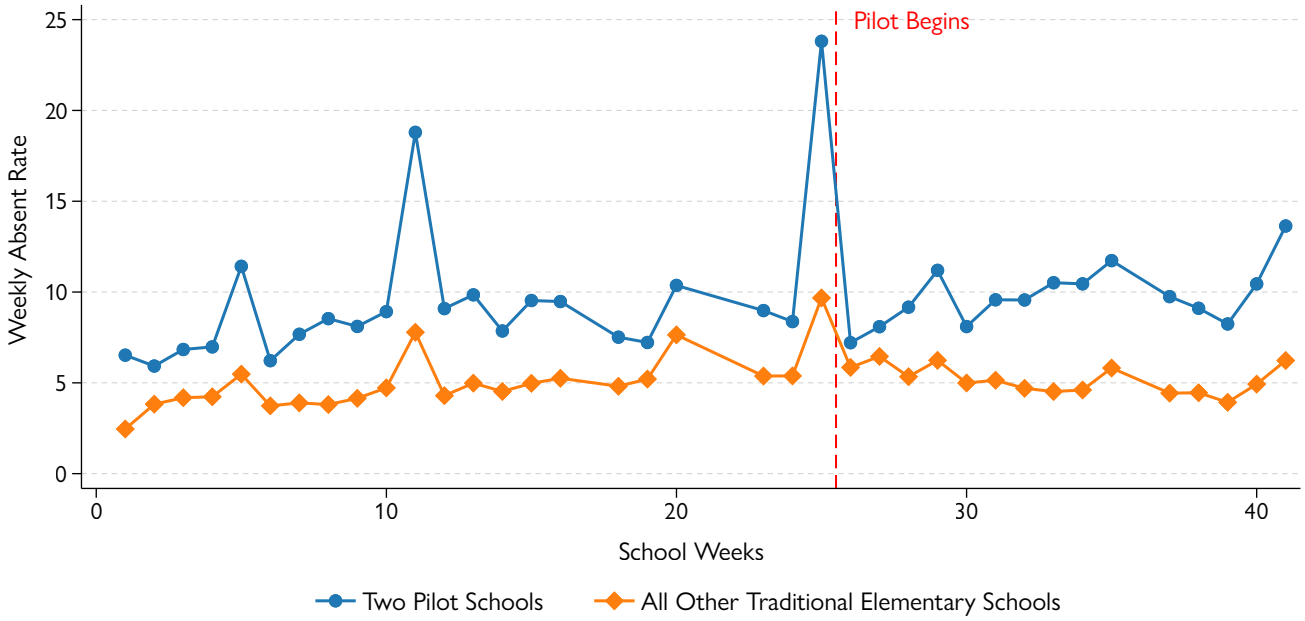
## Finding 6: Impacts on Absence Rates

**Absence trends at the two pilot schools mirrored those at non-pilot elementary schools before the launch of the Attendance Recovery Bus. However, during the pilot period, absence rates at the pilot schools worsened relative to non-pilot schools, suggesting the pilot did not lead to substantial improvements in attendance. A more rigorous statistical analysis confirms this descriptive pattern.**

Figure 22 compares weekly absence rates at the two pilot schools to all other traditional (non-charter) elementary schools in the district throughout 2024–25 (excluding the final week of school, which we show in the appendix). Before the pilot began, trends in the pilot schools closely tracked those in other schools. However, after the pilot launch on January 27, absence rates at the pilot schools increased relative to the comparison group. If the pilot had been effective, we would expect this gap to narrow rather than widen.

Figure 23 presents the same analysis but limits the comparison group to other traditional elementary schools in South Fulton (Zones 1–3) whose student populations are more demographically similar to those of the pilot schools. While the difference in absence levels is smaller with this comparison group, the trend is consistent: Absence rates in the pilot schools increased relative to non-pilot schools after the program began. This finding holds, even when comparing to schools that serve similar communities.

Figure 22. Weekly Absence Rates, Pilot Schools vs. All Other Elementary Schools




*Notes.* We omitted the last week of the school year.

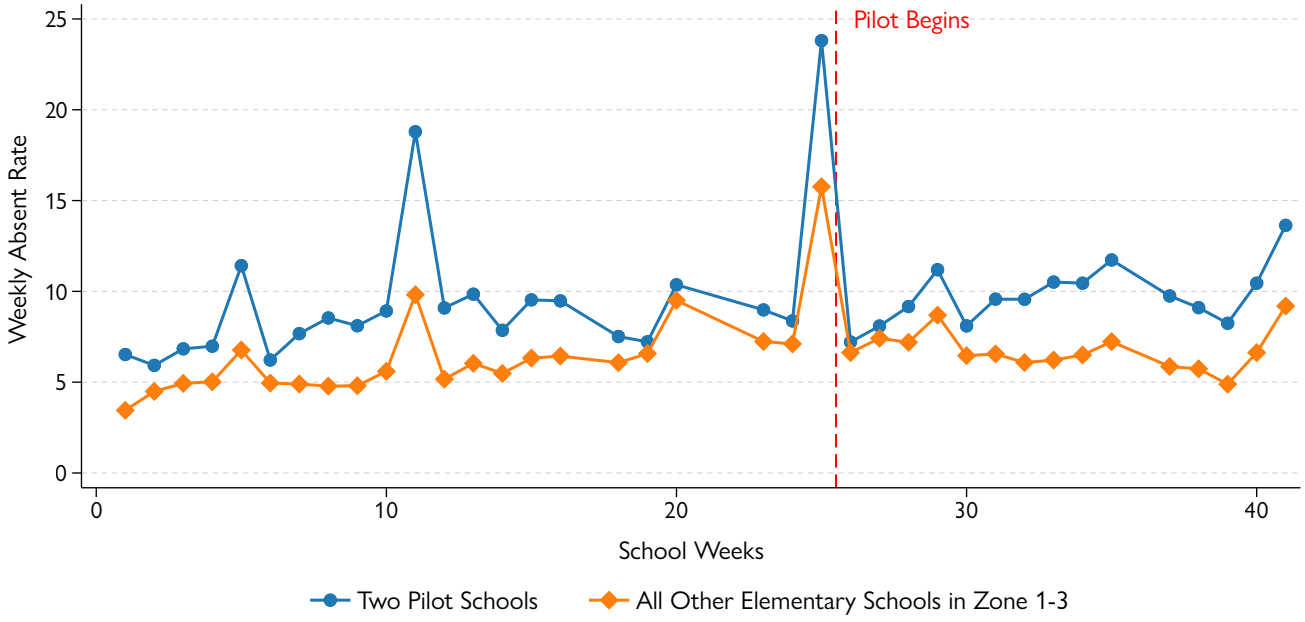
To formally assess the pilot's impact, we conducted a difference-in-differences analysis comparing pre/post changes in daily absence rates at the pilot schools to changes in the comparison groups. The model adjusts for key factors shown to influence absences, including the day of the week, the number of instructional days in a week, and student-level characteristics (e.g., race/ethnicity, gender, identified disability status, English Learner status, and FRPM eligibility).

Figure 24 presents the estimated effects of the pilot using both comparison groups:

- The left side of the figure shows that, relative to all other traditional elementary schools in the district, the pilot is associated with a two-thirds-of-one-percentage-point increase in the daily absence rate at pilot schools.
- The right side shows a smaller estimated increase—about one-quarter-of-one-percentage-point—when compared to traditional schools in South Fulton. However, the 90% confidence interval around this estimate crosses zero, meaning the result is not statistically distinguishable from no effect.

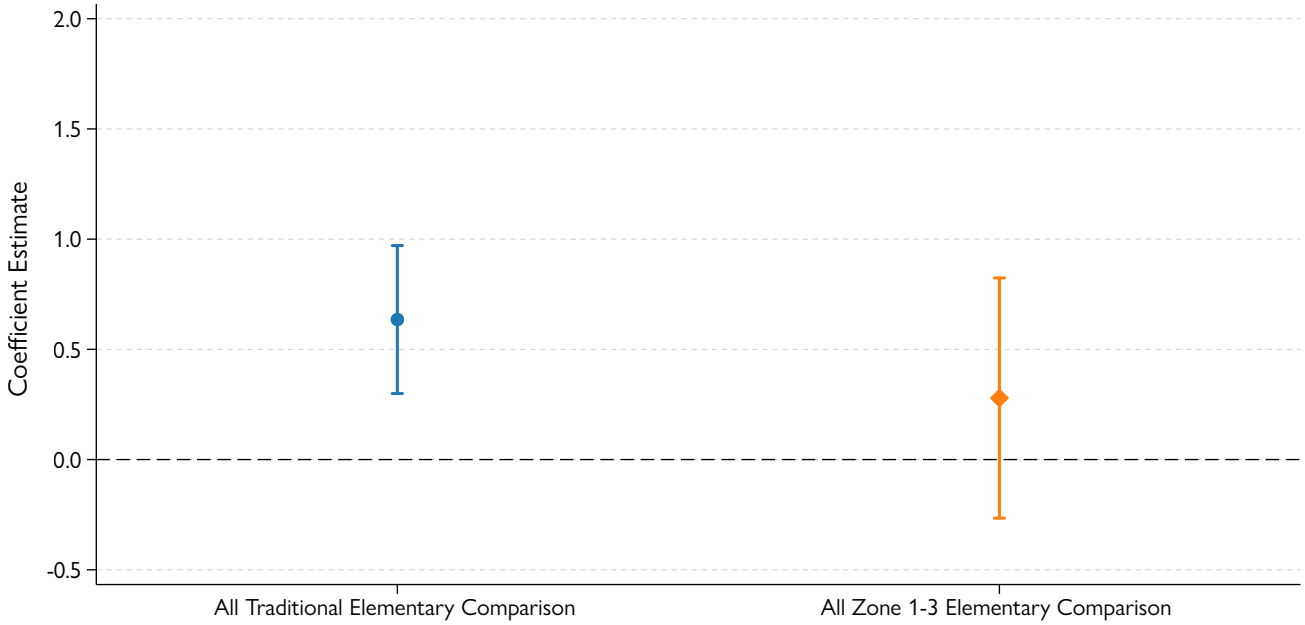
While the South Fulton comparison group better matches the pilot schools demographically, its smaller size reduces statistical precision, as reflected in the wider confidence intervals.

Figure 23. Weekly Absence Rates: Pilot Schools vs. South Fulton Elementary Schools (Zones 1–3)




*Notes.* We omitted the last week of the school year.

Figure 24. Estimated Impact of the Recovery Bus Pilot on Absence Rates




*Notes.* We omitted the least week of the school year.

## Finding 7: Impacts on Student Achievement

**We find some evidence that the Attendance Recovery Bus pilot was associated with improved math achievement for moderate users. We observe no significant effects for occasional users or heavy users. There was no evidence of impact on reading/ELA outcomes for any group.**

Figures 25 and 26 present estimates from a value-added regression model that predicts spring formative assessment scores based on winter scores, grade level, and observable student characteristics (e.g., race/ethnicity, gender, FRM eligibility). We categorized students into three Recovery Bus usage groups:

- occasional users (1–2 total rides over the pilot period),
- moderate users (3–4 total rides or about once per month), and
- heavy users (5 or more rides).

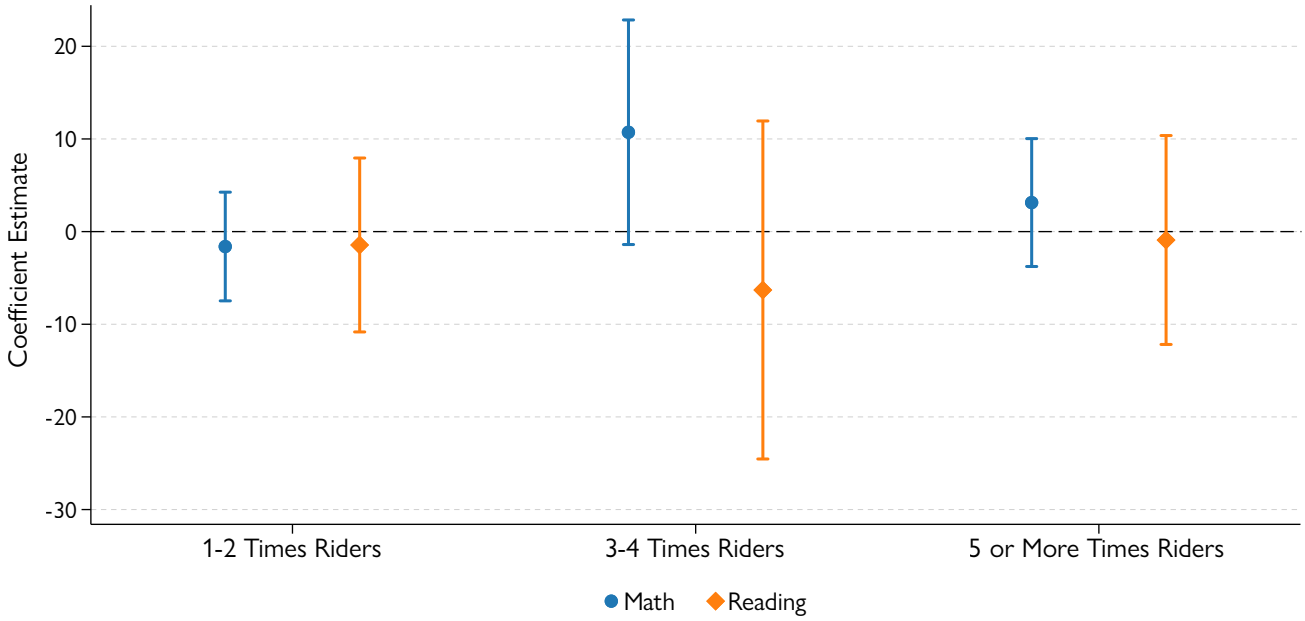
We measured test scores in two ways: the continuous scale score and the national percentile rank (1–99 scale). Figure 25 shows results using scale scores as the outcome, and Figure 26 shows results using percentile ranks.

In both models, the estimated effect of Recovery Bus use on math scores is positive for moderate users, though the scale score estimate has a 90% confidence interval that slightly overlaps with zero, meaning the result is not statistically distinguishable from no effect. For both occasional and heavy users, estimated effects on math are near zero. For reading/ELA, we found no statistically meaningful effects for any user group—regardless of the outcome measure.

These patterns suggest that riding the Recovery Bus once or twice may not provide enough additional instructional time to influence achievement. In contrast, moderate usage—equivalent to gaining 3–4 additional part-days of school—may help students recover some lost learning time, at least in math.

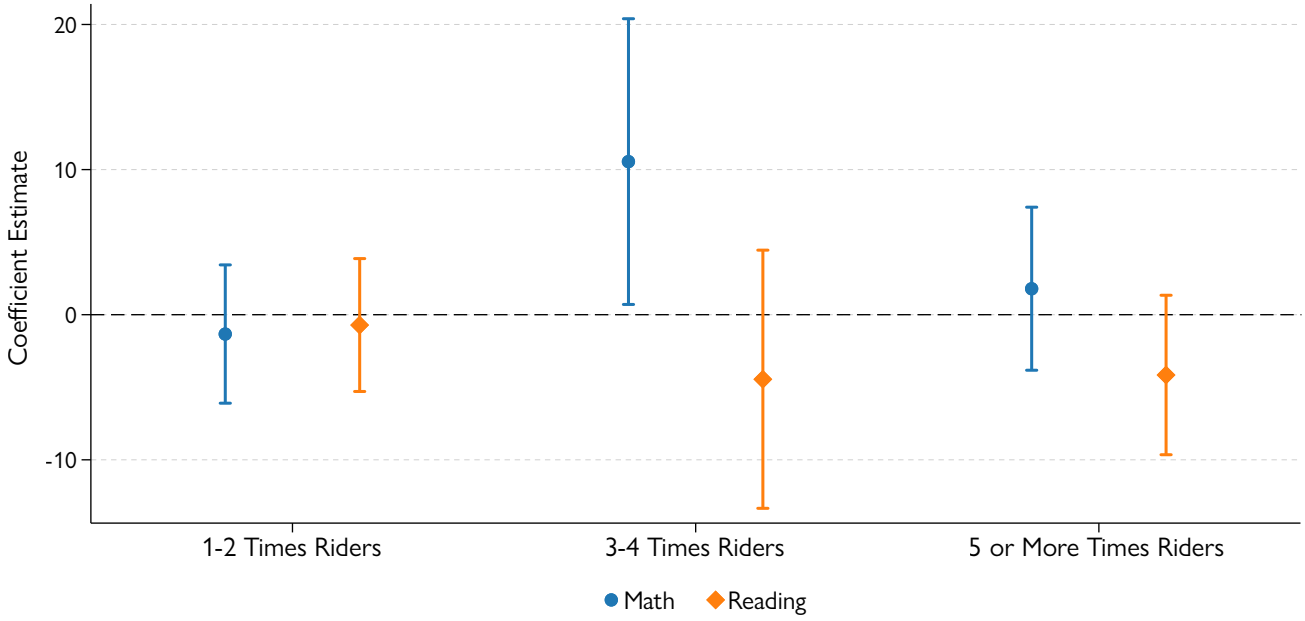
For heavy users, the lack of observed gains may reflect underlying challenges not captured by demographic controls. These students may face persistent barriers, such as family instability, housing insecurity, or other stressors, that both increase the likelihood of chronic absence and limit academic progress—even with increased partial-day attendance.

Figure 25. Impact of Recovery Bus Usage on Student Growth, Scale Scores




*Notes.* We omitted the last week of the school year.

Figure 26. Impact of Recovery Bus Usage on Student Growth, National Percentile Ranks




*Notes.* We omitted the last week of the school year.

## Discussion

The Recovery Bus pilot did not reduce schoolwide average daily absenteeism at either of the two pilot schools. However, there is evidence of improved math achievement among moderate users, suggesting the intervention may have academic benefits for a subset of students. Early in the pilot period, both schools made strong efforts to contact families of initially absent students. Yet, these outreach efforts declined over time, and inconsistent documentation limited our ability to rigorously evaluate their effectiveness.

These findings suggest that, while the Recovery Bus is not a comprehensive solution to chronic absenteeism, it shows some promise—particularly for students who occasionally miss school and may benefit from targeted support. A larger-scale pilot involving more schools and improved documentation of outreach efforts could offer a stronger test of its effectiveness.

The pilot focused only on students already eligible for bus transportation and did not serve students living within designated walk zones—some of whom may live far from school or lack a safe walking route. Expanding access by extending bus service to underserved geographic areas, rather than simply adding a second run on existing routes, could prove more impactful.

More broadly, reducing chronic absenteeism in Fulton County Schools and across metro Atlanta will require a multi-pronged strategy. As highlighted in our review of recent research, several promising interventions exist. However, the effectiveness of any approach will depend on local conditions and the underlying drivers of absenteeism.

Identifying those root causes remains a challenge. In a related project with the district, one of the authors analyzed four years of school climate survey data to examine the relationship between student perceptions and attendance.[12] Some domains, particularly School Building, Safety and Security, and Learning Environment, show modest statistical associations with attendance rates. However, the survey overall had limited explanatory power, suggesting that the district may need new tools to better understand the complex factors driving student absences.

In short, effective strategies will likely require both improving the school experience and shifting perceptions of the value of school attendance. While improving access to transportation may help, it is just one part of a broader effort to support students and families in re-engaging with school.

# Endnotes

1. Fulton County Schools categorizes student absenteeism as follows: Satisfactory (absent less than 5.00% of days enrolled), At Risk (5.00% to 9.99%), Chronic (10.00% to 19.99%), and Severe Chronic (20.00% or more).

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3. We excluded the week preceding the pilot rollout (January 20–24) from the pre-pilot absence tally due to its atypical schedule: January 20 was a holiday, January 22 was a remote learning day, and South Fulton schools operated on a two-hour delay on January 23.

4. Swanson, E., Thompson, S., Ash, J., Didriksen, H., Kane, T. J., Staiger, D. O., & Sanbonmatsu, L. (2025). *Lifting up attendance in rural districts: A multi-site trial of a personalized messaging campaign* (EdWorkingPaper: 25-1189). Annenberg Institute at Brown University. doi.org/10.26300/6q87-1x96

5. Canbolat, Y. (2025). Early warning for whom? Regression discontinuity evidence from the effect of early warning system on student absence. *Educational Evaluation and Policy Analysis*, *47*(2), 477–502.

6. Balfanz, R., & Byrnes, V. (2025). *Delivering success: The GRAD partnership year two impact results*. Everyone Graduates Center.

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11. Edwards, D. S. (2023). Another one rides the bus: The impact of school transportation on student outcomes in Michigan. *Education Finance and Policy*, *19*(1), 1–31.

12. Kim, B. (2025). *School climate and student attendance in Fulton County Schools*. Georgia Policy Labs.

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## About the Georgia Policy Labs

The Georgia Policy Labs is an interdisciplinary research center in the Andrew Young School of Policy Studies at Georgia State University that works through a series of research-practice partnerships across the education pipeline to advance actionable, policy-relevant research to drive decision-making that best serves communities.

We use data to address pressing challenges so that policies, practices, and investments support all students and families. We also cultivate the next generation of interdisciplinary, engaged researchers, who approach evidence collaboratively and with rigor, curiosity, and a focus on solutions.

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