

Ecologies Underlying Chronic Absenteeism in Rural Schools: Toward Strategic Leadership Intervention

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Chronic absenteeism in rural schools calls for strategic response from leaders. In this distinct context, an integrative review was guided by the research question, what do studies of chronic absenteeism in rural U.S. schools identify as factors, challenges, and strategies for leadership? Extant research on chronic absenteeism leaves a critical void in understanding the rural education–school leadership intersection and, specifically, factors that affect student absence and evidence-based counteractions.

Bronfenbrenner’s Ecological Systems Theory undergirded this review wherein qualitative analysis of 107 peer-reviewed sources produced three themes: complex multifactor ecologies underlie chronic absenteeism; adverse childhood experiences affect school attendance and outcomes; and leadership influence and interventions target improved student performance. Findings could contribute to evidence-based programs for trauma-informed attendance strategies, community awareness of chronic absenteeism, and initiatives that build resilience. By exploring factors that contribute to absenteeism in rural schooling and preventative measures, this study aims to provide administrators, educators, and communities with actionable insights and low-cost solutions. Implications for practice, preparation, and research are discussed.

Keywords: adverse childhood experiences, chronic absenteeism, school leadership, rural U.S. schools

Chronic absenteeism and coinciding challenges for rural leadership necessitate interventions for mitigating this primary cause of underperformance. Adopting a whole-child view of attendance, an integrative review was guided by the research question, what do studies of chronic absenteeism in rural U.S. schools identify as factors, challenges, and strategies for leadership? Perspectives from educational leadership can enrich rural education research and practice.

As widely documented, when children in grade three are chronically absent, it is more likely that they will not read on grade level, will further disengage from learning and interactions, and will quit high school (Gottfried & Ansari, 2022; USDOE, 2025). Yet the plethora of studies on chronic absenteeism emphasizes urban and suburban areas more than rural areas (Swanson et al., 2025). This underexplored

area of chronic absenteeism as a challenge and opportunity for rural leadership motivated an educational leadership professor and elementary teacher in an Appalachian region to collaborate.

High absentee rates call upon school districts to increase attendance and performance by addressing root causes (Diliberti et al., 2025; Mullen & Fleming, 2024). An educational crisis, chronic absenteeism in the 2024–2025 school year exceeded pre-COVID levels (Diliberti et al., 2025; Swanson et al., 2025), from 16% to 30% of U.S. students (National Center for Homeless Education, 2017), affecting 16 million (1 in 3 students) by the end of 2022 (Attendance Works, 2023). In every type of community and at all economic levels, students' cognitive and socioemotional (SEL) development has been hampered, undermining their capacity to learn, engage, and graduate from high school (National Center for Homeless Education, 2017; Swanson et al., 2025). The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA, 2015), attracting attention to absenteeism in rural areas, shifted focus to student achievement and strategies for improving graduation rates (U.S. Department of Education [USDOE], 2018). Even before the pandemic, school leaders were addressing chronic absenteeism, with many states including it in their ESSA accountability measures (Jordan & Miller, 2017). Dramatic increases in absenteeism are concerning given the well-established adverse effects on student development, performance, and outcomes (Gottfried, 2014).

Empirical research on the demographics of attendance has established that underlying demographic and systematic factors can perpetuate higher rates of absenteeism (Gottfried et al., 2021). Current studies have confirmed that rural schools face disproportionately high absenteeism rates compared with the national averages. For example, rates were higher for rural schools in California and Wyoming than urban and suburban students (Chang et al., 2018), and, in an Appalachian sample, almost half of 451 preschool children who missed 10% of school had lower literacy gains (Rhoad-Drogalis & Justice, 2018). In Virginia, chronically absent students performed 19% below their peers in reading and 26% in math in the 2023–2024 school year (Virginia Department of Education [VDOE], 2024).

Loss of learning significantly undermines students' outcomes in school, as well as their long-term performance and the health of economies (Gottfried, 2014; Tsevat et al., 2025). State, district, and school leaders have been tasked with responding to chronic absenteeism, such as by publicizing absenteeism data earlier in the school year (Attendance Works, 2024). The role of rural leadership is examined herein relative to consciousness-raising about key factors involved in chronic absenteeism and promising strategic responses. Actions taken must be consistent with the unique characteristics, challenges, and strengths of rural communities (Cox & Mullen, 2023; Mullen & Fleming, 2024; Thier et al., 2020). Beyond merely understanding geography, school leaders grapple with community identity and associated hopes and fears; the diminishment of coal production in Appalachia, which altered the region's identity, is one such example (Azano & Biddle, 2019).

Rural absenteeism as related to school leadership is underexplored, with few exceptions (e.g., Brenner et al., 2021; Grooms & Bohorquez, 2021), which makes it timely to study. By learning how chronic absenteeism and leadership responsibility intersect, school leaders can build collective awareness of core issues and better manage the factors at work in nonattendance and truancy. Actionable insights for trauma-

informed attendance must be met with targeted initiatives that protect and educate children. Through this analysis, robust strategies for making desirable changes that recognize rural community assets can become more widely known.

Regarding definitions, missing 10% of the academic year, which includes excused and unexcused absences and suspensions, is the measure most U.S. states use to determine *chronic absenteeism* (Rogers & Feller, 2018; USDOE, 2025). *Community*, another pertinent term, refers to the deep connection shared by many rural schools and communities, with community school models expanding services, partnerships, and resources while fostering strong relationships to support students. To meet needs, rural schools emphasize place-based education, which connects learning with the local community and builds on its assets (Azano & Biddle, 2019; Thier et al., 2021). These schools also engage in collaborative leadership through shared responsibility with the wider community to address local challenges, enhance learning opportunities, support commitments, and leverage collective strengths (California State Board of Education, 2022).

In general, any non-urban area is *rural* (U.S. Census Bureau, 2026), and rural schools are 25 or more miles from an urban area (National Center of Education Statistics [NCES], 2025). Up to one-half of schools in 26 states are rural (Showalter et al., 2019), and 28% of all public schools in the country are rural, enrolling 19% of students (NCES, 2022). In the Appalachian region, there are 107 rural counties and 840 outside it, yet 42% of the region's population is rural compared with 20% of the nation's. Rural counties are widespread, with over one-half in Appalachian high-density areas, mainly Georgia and Tennessee (Srygley et al., 2026). *Trauma-informed schools* respond to trauma with a safe and supportive environment that cultivates student wellbeing, resilience, and success through policies, practices, and staff training (National Child Traumatic Stress Network, 2017).

Theoretical Framework

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory (EST), an ecology of human development, undergirds this review. The framework arose from interest in environmental influences that affect how people develop within their environments and the various systems that influence them and that they in turn influence. As posited, five intersecting environmental systems impact growth: microsystem (family and school), mesosystem (linkages between microsystems, like parent–teacher interaction), exosystem (indirect external influences like a parent's job), macrosystem (cultural values and laws), and chronosystem (life changes). To understand development more fully, all environmental influences on a person are considered, extending to their impacts on experiences and surroundings. EST views the child as a dynamic entity that progressively moves into and restructures an environment, with the developmental process varying by place and time; culture and public policy influence the quality of their lives.

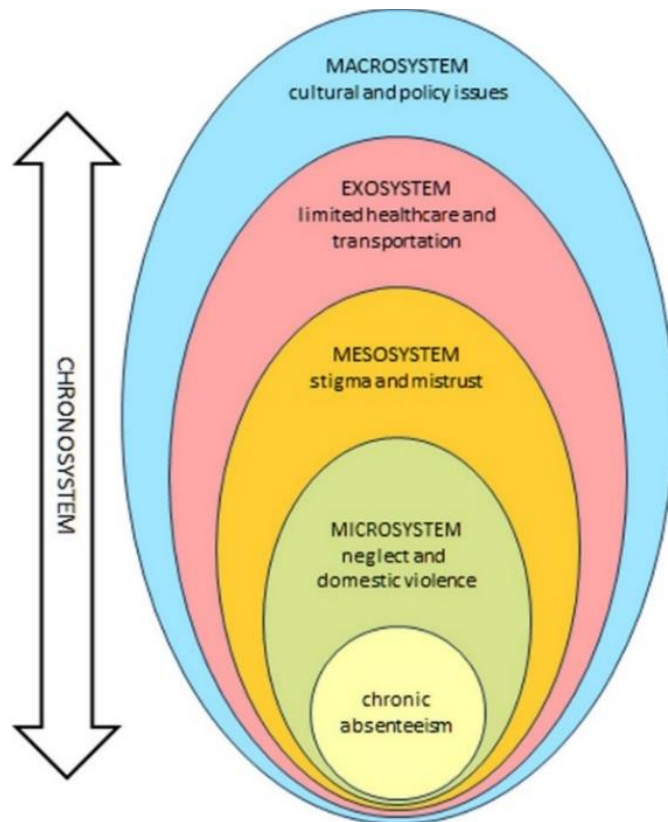
The whole-person approach to theory is being applied in this article to individual student growth in rural school communities whereby leveraging assets, such as local knowledge and relationships, focus on

strengths, not deficits, of place or person (Azano & Biddle, 2019; Brenner et al., 2021). The EST lens is useful for examining student attendance behavior from an ecological perspective on child-centered development and leadership support. In rural education contexts, chronic absenteeism is a complex problem that occurs within a system of relationships influenced by multiple environmental levels and potential developmental barriers. An EST interpretation of chronic absenteeism suggests not an isolated behavioral pattern but rather a multifaceted outcome formed by cumulative exposure to trauma and moderated by ecological systems and leadership influences unique to rural areas.

Figure 1 demonstrates how symptoms of chronic absenteeism manifest at different levels, as suggested by EST. Multiple systems that converge to shape absenteeism can be understood by school leaders and leveraged for intervention, such as child-centered resilience assets (Bellis et al., 2018). Chronic absenteeism necessitates preventative measures and leadership agency focused on strategies, programs, and policies that alleviate developmental harms from structural injustices for diverse student populations (Attendance Works, 2024; Bowerman, 2025).

Figure 1

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) Ecological Systems Theory (Mullen & Cannon, 2026)



Methods

An integrative review method was selected as the most appropriate literature analysis type to explore rural chronic absenteeism connected with adverse conditions, leadership, and interventions. This method allows for connections to be made among complex concepts. To enhance rigor, Whittemore and Knafl's (2005) framework for integrative reviews involving "problem identification, literature search, data evaluation, data analysis, and presentation" was followed (p. 549). Document analysis (Dalglish et al., 2020) and axial coding (Simmons, 2017) were applied to salient sources, which were Adams & Khojasteh (2018), Biddle & Azano (2016); Diliberti et al. (2022); Gottfried & Kirksey (2017), Gottfried et al. (2020), McCoy et al. (2017); Rhoad-Drogalis & Justice (2018), Robinson et al. (2018), Stempel et al. (2017), Stripling (2019); Swanson et al. (2025); Tabone et al. (2024). A list of search terms, databases, and yields follows (see Table 1). The document types analyzed and their counts were: peer-reviewed articles (74), research reports (25), books (4), book chapters in other books (4), and numerous public documents.

Table 1

Search Terms and Results by Database

Productive Search Terms	EBSCOhost	ERIC	APA PsycInfo	Google Scholar
Absenteeism + Rural School	81	179	103	No data
Absenteeism + Rural + Education	24	29	35	No data
Chronic Absenteeism + Education	89	105	130	No data
Chronic Absenteeism, Rural, Leadership	1	2	163	119
Chronic Absenteeism, Education, Rural, Leadership	1	2	322	74

Criteria, Analysis, and Trustworthiness

Peer-reviewed, full-text scholarly sources that address rural education, chronic absenteeism, and/or school leadership were characteristics sought for including studies in this review. Timelines and English as the publication language were other inclusion criteria. A combination of "chronic absenteeism," "rural school," and "leadership" produced hits. Library databases and internet engines were accessed in the search for contemporary literature (2015 to March 2026), with ESSA marking the initiating search year (2015). Additionally, the listings of rural education journals (e.g., *Theory & Practice in Rural Education*) were searched. Publications before 2015 were only included where supported with empirical data. EST was utilized in the interpretation of thematic results.

A scan of 657 abstracts of potential candidates for review led to a further narrowing to 107 peer-reviewed sources, which were read and reviewed. This sample reflects findings from child development, education, medicine, and psychiatry, which hint at the complexity of human life and schooling for rural

residents in environments burdened by structural inequities. Twelve of these studies, mainly quantitative, were more finely analyzed to unpack core issues.

Salient sources were coded and examined using Dalglish et al.'s (2020) READ approach (ready materials, extract data, analyze data, distill). Twenty deductive codes (e.g., chronic absenteeism = EQUI) arose from research questions, search terms, and initial review results, and 62 inductive codes (e.g., adverse childhood experiences = ACEs) followed through open coding.

The authors independently analyzed the data set (salient sources) applying deductive and inductive codes. Axial coding (Simmons, 2017) connected such concepts as chronic absenteeism, community, equity, leadership, rural education, and wellbeing (Simmons, 2017). Zoom meetings occurred from 2023 to 2025 to discuss codes and potential themes; on two of these occasions, three qualitative researchers engaged in member checking. After reviewing the methodological procedures and source selections, they judged the processes sound and interpretations authentic. Searches were updated to ensure timeliness and importance, as documented in analytic memos. This review approach fulfilled quality criteria by incorporating theoretical and diverse scholarship and meeting research standards for thoroughness and transparency.

Limitations

The focus on American research means that non-U.S. information was largely excluded due to national differences. Rural education laws and policies, including governmental structures, vary depending on context. This limitation directly impacts the study's scope and generalizability to rural schools outside the U.S., although selected international studies were included. Even though rural schools are diverse, some factors and trends are common to a country (Thomson Reuters Foundation and EduRural, 2019).

Thematic Analysis of Literature

Three themes addressing rural school attendance issues and responses were identified: (a) complex multifactor ecologies underlie chronic absenteeism; (b) ACEs affect school attendance and outcomes; and (c) leadership influence and interventions target improved student performance. Bronfenbrenner's theory of EST is woven into the results.

Complex Multifactor Ecologies Underlie Chronic Absenteeism

Focusing only on a current situation and isolating factors is potentially misleading, if not shortsighted. Rather, a complex ecology with multiple factors underlies rural absenteeism (Mullen & Fleming, 2024; Özcan, 2021). Bronfenbrenner's EST helps clarify this complexity by emphasizing that attendance behavior emerges from interacting environmental systems—family, school, community, and broader sociocultural conditions. As proposed by EST, the circumstances of habitual absence vary tremendously from student to student and across schools, even in the same district. Absenteeism often

begins during childhood (Gottfried, 2019), which frequently produces less favorable results in crucial developmental milestones, namely language development and literacy and numeracy skills (Gottfried, 2014; Jimenez et al., 2016; McCoy et al., 2017; Watts et al., 2018). Historic patterns of missing school are associated with cumulative and profound impacts on academic growth (Gottfried et al., 2021; McCoy et al., 2017), SEL wellbeing and behavior (Özcan, 2021), and success in life (Watts et al., 2018). Chronic absence has been correlated with lower performance (Berkowitz et al., 2017; Rhoad-Drogalis & Justice, 2018), increased dropout rates (Gottfried & Ansari, 2022), and diminished future opportunities (Gubbels et al., 2019).

Root causes of chronic absenteeism are often interrelated. Socioeconomic status (SES), race and ethnicity, and family background play a pivotal role in higher rates of absenteeism (Gottfried et al., 2021; Rhoad-Drogalis & Justice, 2018). Children from low SES backgrounds disproportionately miss school for one month or more every year (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2013; Chang & Romero, 2008). Transportation issues (Gottfried et al., 2021), health disparities (USDOE, 2023), food insecurity (Gubbels et al., 2019), limited access to support services, and unstable housing and homelessness are all more pronounced for rural students (Berkowitz et al., 2017; Mullen & Fleming, 2024; National Center for Homeless Education, 2017). Unique challenges are also brought about by personal health problems, insufficient support, withdrawal, academic failure, and trauma from ACEs (Diliberti et al., 2025). Students who suffer from anxiety and other social issues may find school interactions, routines, and expectations overwhelming or exhausting (Gottfried, 2014; Gottfried & Ansari, 2022).

Systemic school factors also contribute to chronic absenteeism (Kearney, 2021; Lenhoff & Pogodzinski, 2018). Inadequate staffing, fewer support resources, such as for mental health, or a lack of extracurricular offerings are problematic (Gubbels et al., 2019). Special interest clubs and activities enhance connection, thus overall school attendance can suffer without them (Bethell et al., 2017). All such conditions often reflect broader structural inequalities that affect schools in lower-income and rural areas where inadequate funding hinders the implementation of support services, such as counseling and academic interventions (Gottfried, 2014). Without supportive systems, a school's capacity to address academic, behavioral, and emotional needs is reduced (Chang & Romero, 2008; Stripling, 2019), particularly for students with personal or SES challenges (Gottfried & Ansari, 2022).

Negative school climate (Thapa et al., 2013) further compounds the risk of chronic absenteeism. Bullying, poor teacher–student relationships, and inadequate discipline practices all correlate with higher rates of absenteeism (Gottfried, 2014; Thapa et al., 2013). Anxiety, fear, or feeling unsafe from bullying can also destabilize performance, leading to withdrawal and attrition (Laith & Vaillancourt, 2022). Students in schools with low academic engagement and high levels of discipline are more likely to be chronically absent (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2013).

From an EST perspective, these patterns reflect how macro-level factors (e.g., economic instability, community violence), exosystem factors (e.g., parental work conditions), mesosystem factors (e.g., family–school relationships), and microsystem factors (e.g., classroom climate and peer interactions) converge to

shape attendance. Each day a student misses school, one or more issues are in play: macro-level factors (e.g., local transportation infrastructure and housing, community violence, trauma) (Gottfried et al., 2021), family-level factors (e.g., adult work schedules and relationships with school personnel), school-level factors (e.g., bus schedules, culture, and disciplinary policies), and student-level factors (e.g., feelings of safety, belonging, and engagement). Family factors, for example, may interfere with regular school attendance for some students from low SES backgrounds. The wellbeing of children, particularly in young families, is influenced by economic stability (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2021). Rural areas offer fewer jobs with a sustainable income, forcing many families to juggle low-paying jobs (Green, 2014). Between 2016 and 2022, 14.7% of Appalachian residents had an income under \$26,246 for parents with two children; Appalachia's unemployment and poverty are higher than other rural communities based on survey data from 2020–2024 (Srygley et al., 2026).

The strong influence of families on attendance in early schooling was underscored by Romero and Lee (2008), who found that 21% of kindergarten students in poverty were chronically absent. This trend was observed in broader student populations where those eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, an indicator of lower SES status, were more likely to miss more than 10 days of the school year (Chang et al., 2018). Health-related factors (e.g., malnutrition) in low SES households also correlate with higher school absenteeism (Rappaport et al., 2011). Poor housing conditions magnify health hazards, such as toxic mold, triggering asthma and other reactions (Mizan et al., 2011). Parental beliefs and histories, another critical family factor, influence attendance habits (Gottfried & Kirksey, 2017; Panisch et al., 2020). Parents may not value education, trust the adults in charge (Robinson et al., 2018), or know how many school days their child has missed (Gottfried et al., 2021; Rhoad-Drogalis & Justice, 2018). Robinson et al. (2018) thought that the failure of some parents to comprehend the importance of elementary attendance can delay interventionist work in schools.

ACEs Affect Student Attendance and Outcomes

ACEs—a largely invisible environmental factor impacting chronic absenteeism—can weigh heavily in academic trajectories. Maltreatment and exposure to family, school, and community stressors can also have substantial impact on children's health (Bellis et al., 2018). Occurring before age 18, stressors often arise from abuse, neglect, and household challenges (Loveday et al., 2022), which are commonly used ACE categories (e.g., Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2019).

Research consistently links children who have experienced two or more ACEs with an increased likelihood of chronic absenteeism (Bethell et al., 2014; Stempel et al., 2017). Stressful or traumatic events in childhood can have significant, long-lasting effects on physical and mental health, contributing to poor school attendance. Negative outcomes in adolescence and adulthood (e.g., chronic disease, mental illness, and substance abuse) can extend to discrimination, community violence, bullying, financial insecurity, or housing instability, among other adversities (Barnes et al., 2020; Bellis et al., 2018). Alarming, Crouch et al. (2019) discovered that children with four or more ACEs had higher odds of absenteeism,

disengagement, and grade repetition compared to peers with fewer ACEs. Similarly, chronic absenteeism was associated with multiple ACEs by Stempel et al. (2017), whose research further established that exposure to community violence can lead to underperformance.

EST offers a useful lens here, highlighting how ACEs operate across multiple environmental layers that shape students' development and attendance. From the EST perspective, stressors that manifest as ACEs can deeply affect children (Lin et al., 2021). While stressors do not automatically become ACEs due to protective factors (e.g., resilience) and mediating influences (e.g., social connectedness), stressors are common to ACEs. At the micro level of families, stressors include poverty, limited parental involvement and caregiving, single parenting, divorce, unreliable transportation, abuse, neglect, food insecurity, poor nutrition, transitional housing, somatic illness, lack of health insurance, incarceration, and death (Lin et al., 2021). ACEs have been found to exacerbate mental health issues (e.g., anxiety, depression, and post-traumatic stress disorder), further detracting from academic focus (Gottfried, 2019; Stempel et al., 2017). ACEs can also have intergenerational effects, which intensifies the odds of trauma transmission. Parental history of ACEs, SES status, and housing arrangements can inhibit protective factors based on research involving 581 parents (Panisch et al., 2020).

ACE-related factors can affect the quality of educational experiences, with students exhibiting apathy, difficulty with emotional regulation, and trouble with friendships, which correlate with lower academic success (Attendance Works, 2018; Crouch, 2019). However, when ACE-exposed children feel a sense of belonging, safety, and emotional support at school, they are more likely to be in class and engage positively (Bethell et al., 2017; Gottfried & Ansari, 2022). Environmental factors also impact attendance in that exposure to violence or unsafe conditions in communities may lead to anxiety and social isolation (Gottfried, 2014).

Almost half of children, nationally, have experienced at least one ACE (Bethell et al., 2017; Stempel et al., 2017). ACE exposure not only hinders classroom performance and foundational academic competency but also potentially affects future progress and development, including long-term health and wellbeing (Stempel et al., 2017). Even a single ACE nearly doubles the likelihood of health-related chronic absenteeism (Stempel et al., 2017; Tsevat et al., 2025). Dysfunctional households are at a higher risk for chronic absenteeism and academic attrition (Bethell et al., 2014; Crouch et al., 2019; Stempel et al., 2017). Children who experience neglect and poverty are more likely to face behavioral challenges, including health-risk behaviors (e.g., smoking), which can disrupt school attendance (Felitti et al., 1998). Frequent absence from school has been associated with social alienation and noticeable declines in reading and math scores (Gottfried, 2019). Higher scores of ACEs on research instruments are linked with behavioral and academic challenges—children facing multiple ACEs may struggle with self-regulation, social interaction, and attention, which are critical for success (Jimenez et al., 2016), and emotional responses can manifest as avoidance behavior (Jones & Hoffman, 2023). Neurological responses to stress during critical developmental periods in brain regions responsible for cognitive processes can affect the ability to

regulate emotion (Jamil et al., 2025) and focus on learning tasks and information retention (Xu et al., 2020). Three or more ACEs can lead to lower academic and social performance for students (Stempel et al., 2017).

Adult testimonials further solidify cause for concern given the pervasiveness and impact of childhood adversity. In the U.S., findings from a large adult sample (214,157) indicated that childhood adversity crosses SES characteristics, but some individuals, based on self-reports, were at higher risk of experiencing ACEs: non-White, LGBTQ+, high school dropouts, earnings under \$15,000, and unemployed (Merrick et al., 2018). Sixty-four percent of U.S. adults reported experiencing at least one type of ACE before 18, with nearly one in six (17.3%) indicating exposure to four or more types of ACEs (Swedo, 2023). From Felitti et al.'s (1998) survey with 9,508 adults in a health clinic in California, exposure to ACEs, including intimate partner violence, carried a higher risk of death. The odds of developing chronic conditions, including multimorbidity, become more pronounced with the quantity of ACEs experienced. For example, a survey of 11,972 individuals in China found that rural, less educated adults were more likely to report four or more ACEs from their childhood (Lin et al., 2021). However, different studies with a focus on school attendance have established a strong association of ACE exposure with chronic absenteeism (Crouch et al., 2019). From a survey with 2,452 adults in Wales, Bellis et al. (2018) found that childhood health conditions and school absenteeism intensified with the number of ACEs reported. Using retrospective data, this connection was made by measuring the relationships between ACEs and personal history of health issues.

Associations among chronic absenteeism, ACEs, and demographic characteristics are complex and currently underexplored (Lin et al., 2021). Nonetheless, some studies claim that SES challenges contribute to the disproportionately higher prevalence of ACEs in rural areas, including abuse, neglect, parental substance use, and household instability (Bethell et al., 2017). Persistent poverty, inadequate healthcare infrastructure, and intergenerational trauma further exacerbate the risk of absence from school. SES factors create instability in students' lives, which affect school attendance and widen academic disparities in rural areas. According to Srygley et al. (2026), the challenges are pronounced in Appalachian regions, where social issues intersect to compound obstacles to regular school attendance; these communities fall below the national average in mental and physical health due to significantly higher rates of poverty, limited access to healthcare services, and lower levels of adult education.

Rural areas often face substantial limitations in mental healthcare due to a shortage of providers and for other reasons, and lower SES, among other factors, are significant barriers to accessing and affording care (Kepley & Streeter, 2018). In research on ACEs in rural and urban settings, Elder and Robinson (2018) found that the more ACEs a child has been exposed to, the higher their risk of chronic health problems, even premature death; Southwest Virginia's "violent mortality" level was found to be significantly higher than the nation's—65% of psychiatric patients in the area reported childhood trauma from assault and homicide. Also of great concern, the opioid epidemic's impact on ACEs in rural areas has led to higher instances of unstable housing, including foster placements, factors strongly associated with erratic school attendance (Meinhofer & Angleró-Díaz, 2019; Mullen & Fleming, 2024).

EST further illuminates chronic absenteeism as a trauma-responsive outcome embedded within overlapping environmental systems. Regarding Figure 1, at the microsystem level, through neglect, domestic violence, or other traumatic events, ACEs can impair children's ability to consistently attend and engage in school (De Kleijn & Van Leeuwen, 2018). At the mesosystem level, family–school interaction is frequently weakened by mistrust and “stigma around mental healthcare in rural areas” (Ober et al., 2025, p. 4), which heightens the need for trauma-informed infrastructures. However, rural schools often lack the trauma-informed support systems needed to address students' trauma-related needs, a gap highlighted in recent research on their limited infrastructures and implementation challenges (Tabone et al., 2024).

The ecosystem reflects broader structural barriers prevalent in rural areas (e.g., limited access to healthcare, transportation, and economic opportunity). Contextual stressors exacerbate the impact of ACEs by destabilizing students' lives, which can indirectly influence their attendance (Zulauf & Zinsser, 2019). The macrosystem (cultural values and norms and policy mandates) shapes local responses to childhood adversity. In rural areas, cultural stigmas surrounding mental health, intergenerational trauma, and political underinvestment in public services often limit systemic interventions and perpetuate cycles of absenteeism (Showalter et al., 2019). The chronosystem acknowledges how the intergenerational impact of ACEs within families and communities may affect school attendance trajectories. To counter the compounding influence of rural structural inequities that include ACEs, trauma-informed, targeted interventions and supports are needed.

Leadership Influence and Interventions Target Improved Student Performance

Trauma-responsive leadership and trauma-informed care are key mediating factors for influencing both ACEs and attendance behaviors. EST helps clarify this mediating role by showing how leadership actions shape the school-level microsystem and the family–school mesosystem conditions that support or hinder students' ability to attend and engage. A mindset, trauma-responsive leadership (Bowerman, 2025; Craig, 2015) calls upon rural practitioners to understand the research and have contextual knowledge of their communities so their actions will be evidence-based, impactful, and sustainable.

Rural leaders' feedback converges with the extant literature reviewed. Three studies (Cox & Mullen, 2023; Mitchell et al., 2025; Mullen & Fleming, 2024) have indicated a pressing need to enhance the performance of underprepared learners and different populations (e.g., emergent bilinguals), support students in poverty circumstances, and ensure access to highly qualified teachers. A need for equitable outcomes to be met through interventions and support services that are modified for diverse populations was further highlighted by 100 rural superintendent and principal survey respondents (Mitchell et al., 2025). Compassionate, protective interventions, mechanisms for monitoring punitive actions, and research-backed strategies help ensure that support systems meet rural students' unique needs. A core idea is to shift deficit thinking about rural communities to strengths-based thinking about the concept of place as a way forward, which focuses on identifying and mobilizing local assets, resources, and culture to drive sustainable community development (Biddle & Azano, 2016).

A child-centered perspective on attendance and growth in relation to school, family, community, and society is consistent with principles for trauma-informed care: safety, trustworthiness and transparency, peer support, collaboration, empowerment, and humility and responsiveness (Center for Health Care Strategies, 2026). Transformative action that leverages such frameworks and principles from psychological and healthcare sources can be directed toward reducing exposure to adversity and enhancing resilience for both children and adults. Taking a whole-person approach to trauma requires a host of cohesive interventions that benefit rural youth. Schuermann (2023) argued that rural school personnel must also be a beneficiary, given that they are increasingly at risk of burnout and attrition from traumatic events and caring for children in under-resourced locations.

Creating trauma-informed systems, a crucial leadership challenge in rural settings, involve implementing best practices, integrating SEL learning, and fostering strong community partnerships to address diverse student needs. These approaches leverage rural assets, such as close-knit family and community relationships (Biddle & Azano, 2016; Schuermann, 2023), as well as partnerships with pediatric providers, child welfare, juvenile justice, and organizations. Effective comprehensive support systems have optimal treatment and closer follow-up of individuals struggling from the effects of toxic stress. Educators do not typically specialize in healthcare, so consultation with pediatricians and other providers will bring attention to how to prevent or manage mental health problems that present through a range of emotional and behavioral changes (e.g., sadness, withdrawal, inattentiveness, suicidal thoughts; Ogundele, 2018). An environment of trust, safety, and support in school can mitigate the effects of trauma; ensure strong, supportive relationships between students and staff; and provide or facilitate mental health services to support emotional wellbeing (Daily et al., 2020; Kimberg & Wheeler, 2019). All such actions contribute to better attendance, performance, conduct, participation, outcomes, and health (Domitrovich et al., 2017; Dorado et al., 2016; Ogundele, 2018). Committed leadership teams build new relationships with the community, understanding that connectedness is a core strength of rural education (Azano & Biddle, 2019) and leverage point for reducing absenteeism (Kataoka et al., 2018). Counteracting trauma with “community resilience assets” is key for promoting healing, resiliency, and success, especially for populations with weak attendance records (Bellis et al., 2018, p. 1). Despite past or present problems, students can heal and even thrive in such educative spaces, ultimately leading to enhanced performance (Gottfried & Ansari, 2022) and wellbeing (Sources of Strength, 2025).

Trauma-informed schooling is a vital step in a broader attempt to guarantee that all students can learn in a protected and nurturing environment. Associated practices acknowledge that ACEs can affect a child’s ability to be in class, develop, and interact and that their schools play a key role in reducing harm and increasing support. ACEs are not the sole purview or responsibility of families and communities. Rather, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2019), building upon extant research, argued that crucial skills, such as SEL, must be taught in educational programs aimed at preventing ACEs and lessening their impact. Key programmatic components include monitoring and evaluation, mentoring and after-school activities, and sector involvement (e.g., youth organizations and social/health services) to facilitate the

influence of critical leadership on lives. For example, Sources of Strength (2025), an approved, evidence-based suicide prevention program, has partnered with thousands of schools in North America and some universities to promote wellbeing through adult advisors and peer leaders, with outcomes that suggest youth suicide reductions. Reporting high engagement in this strengths-based program for the 2023–2024 school year, Loudoun County Public Schools (2025), Virginia, combined Sources of Strength's focus on student resilience through healthy coping and positive relationships, with supports for mental health.

Targeting reduction of chronic absenteeism, a three-tiered approach from Attendance Works (2018) focuses on prevention, early intervention, and intensive support. To motivate students to be in school, the prevention tier directs attention to positive school climates and family engagement for which strategies like awareness campaigns and fostering belonging may be employed (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012). The early intervention tier identifies students who show signs of absenteeism and recommends specific supports, such as check-ins with counselors or mentors (Gottfried & Ansari, 2022). Aimed at chronic absentee behavior, the intensive intervention tier enlists schools to work closely with families, community organizations, and social services to address deeper issues that may be aggravating nonattendance (Chang & Romero, 2008).

Evidence-based training is essential for improving staff wellbeing and their capacity to support students (Schuermann, 2023). Childcare training and professional development enable educators to recognize trauma that presents as “disruptive” behaviors and constructively respond in ways that may reduce re-traumatization and increase resilience (Bowerman, 2025; Domitrovich et al., 2017). Key staff training elements are trauma education and impact, mindfulness strategies, coaching/mentoring supports, de-escalation techniques, a growth mindset, and cultural competence and equity (Bowerman, 2025). Trauma-informed care addresses childhood adversity in schools with staff who respond compassionately to challenging behaviors and communicate with medical specialists. Schools use resilience strategies and specific resources to reduce stress. Internet-based resources help with building trauma-informed environments (e.g., National Child Traumatic Stress Network, 2017). For example, school toolkits facilitate actions involving “absenteeism data,” “positive messages,” community awareness (USDOE, 2025). Professional resources are also available to rural schools (e.g., Center for Rural Education, 2025).

Furthermore, in trauma-informed environments, leaders and their teachers consult empirical research on ecological influences (family, school, community) that affect children's education, as well as symptoms of toxic stress that give rise to absenteeism. Through consciousness-raising policies and practices (National Child Traumatic Stress Network, 2017), as well as such data and instruments as ACE risk factor surveys (e.g., Merrick et al., 2018), they can better comprehend how psychological conditions may present as unwanted behaviors. Social conditions and risk factors like trauma, bullying, family dysfunction, academic pressure, and social media threats may externalize as behavioral or adjustment difficulties in classrooms (Arseneault, 2018). Partnerships with parents, specialists, and others promote goal setting, decision-making, optimal treatment, and follow-up in student cases involving chronic stress.

Low-cost strategies are recommended for countering chronic absenteeism in rural districts. Restorative approaches—which foster accountability, empathy, equity, and connection through such strategies as conflict resolution and inclusive dialogue—have improved student behaviors and engagement (Bowerman, 2025; Gregory et al., 2016). Another intervention type for boosting attendance is personalized messaging. In LIFT UP Attendance, Swanson et al. (2025) involved 47 districts in 16 states from 2022 to 2024, which “nudged” caregivers to send their child to school; they were sent timely updates about absences in addition to goal-setting strategies and encouragement. Students’ absences decreased by as much as 4.5% (over half a day in a school year), with the highest benefits for Indigenous groups, slight benefits for White students, and no significant effects for other populations. The modest gains from this nationwide investigation of chronic absenteeism imply that no one measure will likely work.

Personalized messaging, school–family partnerships, and incentives were used for elevating school presence and inclusion in K–12 Appalachian schools within a predominantly White division (Mullen & Fleming, 2024). A “culture of overload” was described by 17 principals and lead teachers alike due to such systematic problems as understaffing and pervasive needs. Across the 10 schools, interviewees described conditions giving rise to trauma in their school communities, with many students from “coal camps,” in residences without quality care, and with severe disabilities and medical conditions. Similar approaches were used to boost attendance and elevate inclusion in response to poverty and disrupted family units. Being in the classroom and learning from teachers were priorities, thus a family–school liaison, with oversight of parental involvement in education, monitored daily attendance. Additionally, children in low SES households received extra food from local feeding programs and on weekends, even though meals were provided to all students via the county’s Community Eligibility Provision. Also, attendance incentives for daily presence, which included field trips, brag tags, and classroom parties, were standard practice.

In such need-support climates, multi-pronged, integrated practices and interventions focus on meeting students’ psychological and other needs and reducing absenteeism. Accordingly, Stripling (2019) introduced an adaptive form of behavior education to school counselors to assist them with implementing an incentive program, which facilitates students’ skills building around positive relationships, coping, and self-regulation. The incentive program reduced daily absences but did not fully prevent chronic absenteeism.

Consequently, coordinating efforts across multiple areas is recommended for addressing absenteeism from different angles (Allensworth et al., 2020; Robinson et al., 2018). To improve attendance and academic outcomes, principals and principal supervisors must invest in professional development and teacher recruitment, retention, feedback, and coaching focused on attendance strategies (Cox & Mullen, 2023; Mullen & Fleming, 2024; Robinson et al., 2018). These leaders also play a crucial role in implementing and monitoring attendance policies to ensure they are consistently enforced and supportive of student needs (Smith, 2024). Demands on principals include codifying attendance expectations and making supports explicit (e.g., behavior management strategies, tailored interventions), and explaining policies to parents (Bartanen, 2020).

Not all guardians with a chronically absent child are aware of the extent of the problem, which is why attendance data and personalized reminders have worked in some situations (Rogers & Feller, 2018; Swanson et al., 2025). Consistent communication with parents, even if not attendance-focused, can also help reduce absenteeism (Bergman, 2015). Besides parents, collaborating with businesses, student organizations, faith leaders, social services, and law enforcement, as well as district and government agencies, mobilizes comprehensive support for attendance and performance (Berkowitz et al., 2017; Childs & Grooms, 2018; Klein et al., 2022). Countering chronic absenteeism necessitates student-specific personalized support plans and mentorship programs (Sebastian & Allensworth, 2020) and ease of transportation and, where possible, solutions to other challenges facing families (Gottfried et al., 2021).

As instructional leaders, principals emphasize data-driven practices to identify attendance patterns and develop targeted interventions (Cox & Mullen, 2023). Collaborating with teachers to implement engaging and relevant curricula, they create a school environment where students feel that attending is beneficial and directly tied to success (Dinsdale, 2017). This approach involves noticing and supporting individuals who are frequently absent, thereby proactively working to keep students engaged in school (Mullen & Fleming, 2024).

Effective district policies address barriers that commonly contribute to absenteeism, such as food insecurity (Crouch et al., 2019; Gottfried, 2019), unreliable transportation (Susman-Stillman et al., 2018), and limited access to healthcare (Stempel et al., 2017). Culturally sensitive practices build trust through respect for families' values and beliefs, which encourage participation in decision-making and strengthen linkages between home and school (Barbosa & Coneway, 2023; Stefanski et al., 2016). For students facing disrupted lessons and attendance in remote learning situations, district investment in broadband infrastructure and technology facilitates educational equity and continuity (Smith, 2024). Training rural educators to implement trauma-informed practices and act on early warning signs of disengagement supports an integrated approach to improving attendance and educational outcomes (Allensworth et al., 2020; Frankland, 2021). All interventions on behalf of families require strategic coordination, such as with partners and local organizations, to provide essential services, including meal programs, transportation assistance, and mental health support (Mullen & Fleming, 2024).

Discussion and Implications

In response to the research question posed, literature on chronic absenteeism addressed specific factors, challenges, and strategies, which underscored the complexity of this problem for leadership in many rural areas. Root causes of student absence were described, with some specificity about evidence-based interventions and practices, although the descriptions were more general.

EST was used by the authors to map student development in relation to chronic absenteeism. Review of extant research uncovered complex multifactor ecologies in association with chronic absenteeism; ACEs affect school attendance and outcomes; and leadership influence and interventions

target student performance. Thematic findings, seen through the EST lens, reinforced the crucial role of schools, families, and communities in ACE-afflicted rural environments where every student must be learning, protected, and nurtured. Positive school cultures described as need-support climates are environmentally supportive, engaging places where adults intervene on behalf of every child so they can flourish (Stempel et al., 2017).

Practice

In the growing interest in underlying factors that contribute to chronic absenteeism, all involved must be held accountable. While chronic absenteeism's root causes are often multifaceted and may originate outside schools, rural districts play a critical role in mitigating the impact and reducing the number of days missed. Families and individuals have more influence than schools in determining attendance, according to Lenhoff and Podgodzinski (2018), which makes it even more critical that school personnel exert strong influence. For example, multiple options are advised for working with rural families to accommodate preferences for communication and engaging in services; inviting their perspectives on different issues that include their child's health and behavior is also key (Ober et al., 2025).

Outside factors that schools have the inability to change, such as social and family issues, can contribute to how programs are initiated and how they hold students accountable (Lenhoff & Pogodzinski, 2018). Barriers that inhibit families from sending their children to school should be met with leadership solutions that facilitate home and school linkages (Adams & Khojasteh, 2018; Gottfried et al., 2021).

Educational systems are encouraged to rely on community-based resources, such as services that help with mental or physical health and after-school programs. Collaboration with families and community organizations is key for targeting areas of support to promote and sustain positive attendance. Strategies for countering absenteeism include staff training and professional development, data-driven decision-making, positive attendance cultures, school-family-community partnerships, early intervention and monitoring, personalizing messaging, incentives, attractive opportunities, and services addressing health and wellness needs.

Preparation

Ecological frameworks like EST can be used to help guide aspiring leaders' and teachers' understanding of how environmental systems link with leadership challenges to influence rural attendance behavior. University courses and district training programs are well positioned to guide consciousness-raising and sensitivity around the complexity of chronic absenteeism in rural areas. Teacher and leader preparation for work in rural K–12 districts with excessive attendance issues could benefit from knowledge of evidence-based and promising practices for all staff (Regional Educational Laboratory Southwest, 2025).

Mental and physical health support, trauma awareness, and resilience strategies are core areas of preparation. To address specific challenges in schools, a host of strategies are introduced to preservice practitioners that include data-driven intervention, skills in collaboration and community partnership, consultation with providers, and relationship building with students and caregivers. Such preparation would

expose them to attendance policies, early warning and monitoring systems, nudging and other low-cost behavioral interventions, student mentoring programs and youth organizations, tiered interventions, school climate, and family engagement.

Research

There is a growing call for research in rural education to identify practices and policies that enhance the strengths of rural life (Crouch et al., 2019; Showalter et al., 2019). Such sources recognize the unique dynamics of rural culture and distinct needs of students within their familial, cultural, and economic ecologies (NCES, 2025). More illustrative examples of beneficial rural practices, complete with steps and outcomes for promoting student resilience and wellbeing, would be useful in the difficult work of rural leadership. A resounding message was that robust promising practices for countering chronic absenteeism must be linked with partnership, policy, and leadership. State and federal policies targeting rural absenteeism need to be assessed relative to their impact and scalability in rural districts, as well as their capacity to adapt to the evolution of societal trends, community needs, and technological changes.

New investigations could further illuminate cultural and familial dynamics (e.g., community ties, family expectations, and stigma surrounding absenteeism) and how these influence attendance rates for children of all ages in rural contexts (Crouch et al., 2019; Stefanski et al., 2016). Because transportation infrastructure, or the lack thereof, poses significant challenges in many rural areas (Attendance Works, 2018; Gottfried et al., 2021), innovative solutions like community-based transportation programs should be evaluated. Trauma-informed practices and school-based mental health programs need ongoing assessment of their effectiveness (Gottfried, 2019; Stempel et al., 2017; Stanzak & Oliver-Lemieux, 2023). Other areas of further study include parent–school relationships and strategies for fostering stronger engagement and addressing intergenerational poverty (Barbosa & Coneway, 2023). Research on how best to support the attendance and flourishing of diverse populations is another direction.

Conclusion

A one-size-fits-all approach to preventing chronic absenteeism is insufficient, particularly in rural contexts where challenges and assets differ markedly. Bronfenbrenner's EST underscores this point by showing that students' attendance behaviors emerge from interactions across multiple environmental layers—from family and school to community conditions and broader social forces.

Therefore, rural school leaders are encouraged to adopt multifaceted, locally responsive strategies that address root causes and leverage strong community ties. Because excessive absenteeism undermines performance, graduation prospects, and long-term wellbeing, rural districts require targeted, community-anchored solutions that reflect their unique environmental, cultural, and economic conditions.

External factors like ACEs, parental mistrust, and persistent stigma surrounding mental health exert a powerful influence on attendance in rural settings. Through the EST lens, these stressors operate across micro-, meso-, and exosystem levels, shaping students' daily experiences and capacity to attend school.

Yet leadership plays a critical mediating role: rural principals and district teams shape the climate, partnerships, and trauma-informed systems that make regular attendance possible. Their decisions directly determine whether schools become protective, connected environments that counteract adversity rather than reproduce it.

Findings from this review can raise awareness of the complex ecologies shaping chronic absenteeism and reinforce the need for evidence-based, trauma-informed interventions that build resilience. Such insights can strengthen preparation programs and support practicing rural leaders as they work to address deep-rooted barriers to attendance and promote more equitable outcomes.

Ultimately, EST highlights why an ecological perspective is vital: chronic absenteeism in rural areas reflects layered, interacting systems rather than isolated problems. The intricate conditions underlying chronic absenteeism in rural areas call for strategic, place-conscious leadership. Such leadership integrates community assets, coordinates cross-sector supports, and fosters school cultures where every student is known, supported, and present.

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