

# Strengthen Intrapersonal and Decision-Making Skills in High School Students to Reduce Risk of Chronic Absenteeism.

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## Introduction

Chronic absenteeism, commonly defined as missing 10% or more days of the school year for either excused or unexcused absences, has become a growing national concern, worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic. The effects of chronic absenteeism are far-reaching, harming not only the students who miss school but also their peers, schools, and districts.

Being chronically absent puts students at a significantly higher risk of academic failure, grade retention, and dropout (Eklund et al., 2020; Liu et al., 2019). Chronic absenteeism also disrupts classroom dynamics and slows instructional progress for all students, even those with higher school attendance levels (Gottfried, 2019). Additionally, since many local and state funding formulas factor in student attendance, chronic absenteeism translates into direct budgetary losses (Lieberman, 2024).

During the 2022–23 school year, nearly twice as many students nationwide were chronically absent compared to pre-pandemic levels. To date, no state that reports attendance data has returned to, let alone fallen below, its pre-pandemic rates of chronic absenteeism (Return to Learn Tracker, 2025).



## Using Social-Emotional Skills to Improve Attendance

In response to these challenges, many districts are turning to social-emotional learning (SEL) as a strategy to reduce chronic absenteeism (Eklund et al., 2022). Research conducted by Polikoff et al. (2023) revealed that one reason students may miss school is that they feel disengaged, unsupported, or overwhelmed. SEL initiatives, designed to help students develop skills such as self-awareness, self-management, and responsible decision-making, can mitigate some causes of absenteeism.

Several studies have demonstrated that students with less developed skills are at higher risk of being chronically absent (Meyer, 2025; Yin et al., 2023). Correspondingly, programs that focus on building students' social-emotional (SE) skills have demonstrated a positive impact on school attendance (Cipriano et al., 2023; Villares et al., 2024). However, there is relatively less research examining which, if any, specific SE skills emerge as being more strongly associated with reducing the risk of chronic absenteeism.

This study investigated two aspects of the relationship between Social-Emotional Competence (SEC) and chronic absenteeism: (1) if high school students' SEC, as measured by the DESSA, is associated with their risk of being chronically absent and (2) if particular SEC constructs more strongly associated with a student's risk of being chronically absent than others.



## Methods

**Sample.** The dataset included demographic characteristics, scores from the DESSA High School Edition Student Self-Report (DESSA; LeBuffe et al., 2020) administered in Fall 2023, and attendance records of 10,085 9th-12th graders in a Mid-Atlantic district in the 2023-2024 school year.

### Measures.

**SEC.** Students' SEC was measured using the DESSA, a 50-item, standardized, norm-referenced self-report behavior rating scale for students in 9th – 12th grades. The DESSA yields T-scores and classifies scores into “Need”, “Typical”, or “Strength” categories for overall SEC and seven SE competencies: Self-Awareness/Optimistic Thinking (SA/OT), Self-Management (SM), Social Awareness (SO), Relationship Skills (RS), Goal-Directed Behavior (GB), Personal Responsibility (PR), and Decision-Making (DM). Forty percent of students scored in the “Need” range and 6.7% in the “Strength” range. The mean SEC T-score was 43.69 (SD = 10.15), indicating that the sample demonstrated lower levels of SEC than the national sample (Mean = 50, SD = 10). Table 2 contains the mean T-scores for each competency.

**Chronic Absenteeism.** Absenteeism was measured based on district records of student attendance. A binary indicator was created to reflect whether a student was chronically absent, defined as missing 10% or more of school days during the year.

**Demographics.** Student-level demographic information included gender, race/ethnicity, ELL status, and special education status. These covariates were used to control for potential confounding factors in modeling the relationship between SEC and absenteeism.

**Data Analysis.** We first conducted a logistic regression, with students' Fall DESSA SEC scores as the predictor (controlling for grade level, gender, race, and ethnicity), and the binary chronic absenteeism variable as the outcome. We ran three models to estimate the odds of a student being chronically absent: (1) when a student's Fall DESSA SEC score was in the “Need” range, (2) when a student's Fall DESSA SEC score was in the “Strength” range, and (3) for each one-point increase in a student's Fall DESSA SEC T-score. These models provided estimates of how overall SEC relates to students' likelihood of being chronically absent.

Next, we investigated whether certain SE skills are more strongly related to reduced chronic absenteeism than others. Since the chronic absenteeism variable was binary, generalized structural equation modeling (GSEM) was used. GSEM builds on the first logistic regression model by including latent factors. Since the SE competencies on the DESSA are theoretically and statistically interrelated, using latent factors accounts for shared variance. The DESSA competencies were organized based on the 3-factor CASEL model: intra-personal (SA/OT, SM, GB), inter-personal (SO, RS), and decision-making (PR, DM). All factors were analyzed in the model simultaneously.

The logit link estimated the log odds of absenteeism for each one-unit increase in the latent factor score, holding other predictors constant. The following student demographics and socioeconomic characteristics were also accounted for: grade level, English learner status, special education status, gender, race/ethnicity. This approach offered two advantages over standard logistic regression: (1) the ability to test whether distinct domains of SEC had unique associations with absenteeism after adjusting for their intercorrelations, and (2) closer alignment to theory by grouping competencies into broader latent factors.

## Results

Results from our initial logistic regression analysis showed that students with SEC in the Need range were 77% more likely to be chronically absent (OR = 1.77). Students with SEC in the Strength range had 33% lower odds of chronic absenteeism (OR = 0.67). Each 1-point increase in SEC T-score reduced the odds of absenteeism by 3% (OR = 0.97).

When we used GSEM to further investigate whether certain SE skills serve as protective factors against chronic absenteeism, results showed that intrapersonal skills (OR = 0.98, 95% CI [0.97, 0.99],  $p = .004$ ) and decision-making skills (OR = 0.98, 95% CI [0.97, 1.00],  $p = .009$ ) were significant protective factors. Students scoring higher on these competencies were less likely to be chronically absent. Interpersonal skills, however, were not significantly associated with absenteeism (OR = 0.999,  $p = .84$ ).

A key limitation is that many students demonstrated relatively low social-emotional competence in our sample, with relatively few scoring in the Strength range. This spread of scores may have limited the observed relationships between SEC and absenteeism.

## Conclusion

These results add to a growing body of evidence linking SEC to attendance. The findings of this study indicate that in addition to overall SEC, intrapersonal skills and decision-making skills serve as protective factors against chronic absenteeism. Students who reported higher levels of intrapersonal skills (self-awareness/optimistic thinking, self-management, and goal-directed behavior) and decision-making skills (personal responsibility and decision-making) at the beginning of the year were significantly less likely to miss 10% or more of the school year.

Schools may act on these findings to support students' attendance. First, schools might use SEC assessments to proactively identify students who may benefit from additional support and SEL instruction at the beginning of the school year. Second, SEL programming that emphasizes goal-setting, personal responsibility, and decision-making could strengthen skills protective against absenteeism. Even modest improvements in intrapersonal or decision-making skills could reduce the likelihood of chronic absenteeism for these students. Addressing chronic absenteeism through SEL not only promotes attendance but also equips students with lifelong skills that contribute to their academic success and well-being.



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Table 1

*Demographics of High School Sample in the 2023-2024 School Year*

	N	Percent
Total Sample	10085	100
Gender		
Female	5059	50.2
Male	5026	49.8
Grade		
9 <sup>th</sup> Grade	3393	33.6
10 <sup>th</sup> Grade	2475	24.5
11 <sup>th</sup> Grade	2436	24.2
12 <sup>th</sup> Grade	1781	17.7
Race & Ethnicity		
American Indian or Alaskan Native	17	0.2
Asian	374	3.7
Black/African American	2729	27.1
Hispanic/Latinx	2034	20.2
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	14	1
White	4438	44
Other (Including Two or More)	479	4.7
Receiving Specialized Services		
Special Education Services	911	9
Section 504 Plan	593	5.9
English Language Learner	610	6
Gifted/Talented	1738	17.2
Variables of Interest		
Chronically Absent Students	1878	18.6
Students with SEC in Strength range	675	6.7
Students with SEC in Typical range	5332	52.9
Students with SEC in Need range	4078	40.4

Table 2

*Means and Standard Deviations of DESSA Scales*

	Mean	S.D.
Social-Emotional Composite	43.69	10.15
Self-Awareness/Optimistic Thinking	44.51	10.21
Self-Management	44.69	10.55
Social Awareness	43.96	10.50
Relationship Skills	45.31	10.00
Goal-Directed Behavior	44.21	9.44
Personal Responsibility	44.91	10.00
Decision-Making	44.08	10.55