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HEALTHCARE

Here's how APS is using nurse practitioners to combat absenteeism



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Key Points

Akron Public Schools is focusing on reducing chronic absenteeism by addressing barriers that prevent students from attending school.

A partnership with Akron Children's Hospital places nurse practitioners in schools to provide on-site medical care.

This school-based health program reduces the amount of time students spend out of class for appointments and offers convenience for guardians.

The district also provides resources like free meals, family focus groups and absence intervention teams to support students.

When a child isn't coming to school regularly, [Akron Public Schools](#) staff does not assume it's just because they don't want to be there.

Instead, over the years, the district has worked to address the real-life barriers that often prevent kids from attending school regularly, said Allyson Strickland, attendance lead for the district. Some of these barriers include a student having to attend doctor's appointments, not having school supplies or feeling like they don't belong.

This year, the district is placing greater focus on combating chronic absenteeism, which occurs when a student misses at least 10% of instructional time, said Debra Foulk, the district's executive director of business affairs.

One of the main ways the district is doing that is through a partnership with [Akron Children's Hospital](#), embedding nurse practitioners in schools to diagnose and treat students for anything normally seen in a pediatrician's office

Jeff Keruski, hearing officer for Akron Public Schools, said ultimately, the district needs students in school every day, on time and prepared to learn.

“There’s a separation as children miss school,” he said. “They become disenfranchised. They don’t feel like they’re part of the school.”

The district’s focus on reducing chronic absenteeism comes after the 2025 passing of [House Bill 96](#), which was enacted as part of Ohio’s 2026-2027 operating budget. It [requires schools to adopt attendance policies](#) that work to prevent chronic absenteeism, communicate with families and address the root causes of absences.

Keruski hopes that by removing barriers, students can come to school regularly and receive the education they need.

Here are some ways APS is working to combat chronic absenteeism.

Partnership with Akron Children’s reduces time spent out of school at doctor’s appointments

Since its beginning in 2019, Akron Children’s [School-Based Health Services program](#) has expanded to more schools each year, said Teresa Fletcher, the program's coordinator. There are currently 11 nurse practitioners involved.

Each year, the state offers grants for school-based health programs, and Akron Children’s applies consistently, Fletcher said. The hospital funds the remainder of the program through other grants.

“It’s high-quality care. It’s not an urgent style,” said Fletcher, who is also a nurse practitioner and advanced practice manager. “These people, my providers, are in the same school every week, building relationships within that school and that

community, and that really builds a lot of trust in the healthcare system and really improves the health of that school community.”

Currently, the school-based health services are in 25 districts, Fletcher said. The services don’t stop over the summer, either.

Nurse practitioners hold summer wellness days to make sure students are prepared and healthy for the school year.

This past summer, as of Aug. 12, 390 students were seen at these health clinics, and 329 vaccines were given, Fletcher said.

Convenience and comfort

Nationally, 88% of students on average are sent back to class after seeing a school nurse, Fletcher said. At Akron Children’s, that statistic is about 93%.

Most of these providers work in the schools full-time, and having them there not only reduces the amount of time students spend outside of class, but it saves their guardians time, too.

The program also has a contract with Akron Children’s pediatric mental health nurse practitioners, and telehealth services can be provided to kids while they’re in school.

These appointments typically have a three-month wait period in an outpatient setting, Fletcher said. In school, kids can get an appointment in one to two weeks.

Braje Jones and Lavante Cruz have seven kids, and all of them are currently in school at APS.

They said it’s both comforting and convenient to have the nurse practitioners at school.

“I don’t have to take off work, and they make the appointments during school hours,” Jones said.

She also mentioned that her son has bad asthma.

“Just to have the nurse on staff, I feel real confident,” she said.

Fletcher said that for every visit a student has with a nurse practitioner at the school, about two hours and 40 minutes are saved.

Appointments typically last around 30 minutes. Guardians don’t have to leave work, book an appointment or travel to a doctor’s office. Instead, everything is simply done right in the school.

Prescriptions can be sent for pickup, a care plan and visit details go right to the MyChart electronic health record and providers can communicate directly with students’ providers if they are at Akron Children’s.

“Let’s say if I have an elementary child that just got diagnosed with diabetes, sending them to school, I mean, it would make me deathly afraid,” Fletcher said. “But when you walk into that school, and you see this Akron Children’s badge ... there’s that built trust line there.”

Private insurance or Medicaid are billed for the services.

Keeping families informed

Foulk said the district does its best to keep families in the loop when it comes to keeping their kids healthy and safe.

“Then they can go ahead and be a quick and avid learner while they’re here,” she said.

Here are some ways the district works to accomplish that goal:

Providing nutritious breakfast, lunch and after-school snacks at no cost to families.

Keeping medical professionals informed of medicines specific students may need throughout the day.

Offering flu clinics to give kids the vaccine.

Keeping parents informed of vaccinations their kids need through an annual packet.

Having nurse practitioners refer kids to specialists if necessary after school appointments.

Reviewing attendance data on a weekly basis and taking action where necessary.

Helping students feel welcome

Strickland said fostering positive relationships between APS staff and students and their families is important to helping kids feel welcome at school.

“We do realize no one wants to go somewhere where they may not feel like they’re wanted, and we never want a student to feel like they are not wanted, or they don’t belong, so we take that very seriously,” she said.

The district holds family focus groups where people can share barriers they’re facing in getting their kids to school on time each day, and APS can offer solutions.

The district has many resources it can tap into through partnerships with community organizations. It also has a partnership with [Stay in the Game](#), a Cleveland Browns Foundation initiative that provides strategies for preventing absenteeism.

Each APS school has an absence intervention team, Strickland said. It reaches out to students who are coming close to missing 10% of instructional time and offers support.

“We know that we can’t wait until a student becomes chronically absent to begin to provide those supports, so we work to take a preventative approach,” she said.

The district is also in the process of creating an attendance support hub so families can receive on-site resources and assistance for barriers they’re facing.

Keruski said providing these resources isn’t just important to helping kids now, but also for their future.

“Every child that we educate here at Akron Public Schools will become the leaders of tomorrow, and they will be someday working within the Akron community,” he said. “We want to make sure that every resource we give them is the resource they need to be successful.”