

REDUCING CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM



Baton Rouge Youth Coalition

Baton Rouge, Louisiana

500

Average number of students served

85%

Students from low-income families

Main funding sources:

- ▶ Individual donors
- ▶ East Baton Rouge Parish School System
- ▶ Corporate and foundation grants

Providing a culture of care through supportive adults and mentors

In a survey of school districts during the 2023-2024 school year, nearly 9 in 10 district leaders reported at least a modest level of chronic absenteeism in their schools. Chronic absenteeism — generally defined as students missing 10% or more days of school — is a pervasive issue affecting students across grade levels. From its effect on students' academic performance to disproportionately affecting systemically disadvantaged students, chronic absenteeism has raised the alarm of many and is not an issue that schools should be left alone to solve. Afterschool programs are an opportune partner to strengthen students' connection to school, improve school-day attendance levels, and keep young people on track toward a bright and promising future.

Overview

The **Baton Rouge Youth Coalition, Inc.** (BRYC) is a free in-school and afterschool program that strives to help under-resourced youth excel in high school, advance through college, and secure career-track jobs upon graduation. To reach these outcomes, BRYC offers a variety of resources, including academic and college application support, mental health counseling, and mentoring for its 8th-12th graders, who the program refers to as Fellows. A foundational pillar of BRYC's work is supporting students through a network of caring adults in middle and high school and beyond.

A typical day for students

At the end of the school day, BRYC Fellows receive free transportation from their school to their BRYC site where, upon arrival, they take advantage of the numerous services BRYC offers, such as free snacks, tutoring, and mental health counseling. Afterward, session A, or the "learning session," begins. During session A, Fellows work on developing skills related to their grade-level program: 8th graders work on a year-long social justice project through Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) to prepare them for the transition to high school; 9th and 10th graders focus on forming useful study habits through self-regulated learning; and 11th and 12th-graders' programs are oriented toward college readiness, including ACT prep and navigating the college application and financial aid processes.

After a break, Fellows participate in session B, the last program of the day. There, they receive small-group support or one-on-one college application support from their mentors.

Program characteristics

Central to BRYC's programming is the "nucleus of adult support" available to all Fellows and the program's extensive alumni network. Throughout the program, fellows interact with a range of caring adults, from their program managers to BRYC's in-house mental health counselor, all of whom are given the necessary training to support Fellows' academic and personal journeys.

A major draw of BRYC is the relationships Fellows build with their mentors. Mentors, who volunteer once a week for a minimum of one school year, come from diverse walks of life and are matched with Fellows after two to three weeks of intentional whole-group team-building. All Fellows benefit from mentors who receive intensive training in grade-specific programming to best support their college readiness. Mentors also empower Fellows to become agents in their own education through self-regulated learning, a proactive learning strategy that centers self-monitoring and self-reflection. One facet of this strategy is "teach to learn," where 8th-11th graders teach their mentors what they learned in the previous session. Mentors are then "quizzed" to earn BRYC points that result in a monthly prize for their Fellows. This weekly practice not only fosters a deeper connection to learning but also strengthens the relationship between Fellows and their mentors.

In addition to mentors serving as trusted adults in Fellows' academic journeys, Fellow-mentor relationships are grounded in BRYC's "Culture Code." Rooted in BRYC's core values, the Culture Code – a document co-created with program participants that guides Fellow-mentor interactions – helps Fellows and mentors cultivate trusting relationships by emphasizing the importance of commitment, equity, and compassion. As a result, mentors become an important part of Fellows' overall support network, which often extends beyond high school, alongside teachers, other BRYC staff, and guardians.

Outcomes

As a result of BRYC's intentional curriculum and caring adults, 100% of 8th-11th grade Fellows were promoted to the next grade in the 2023-2024 school year. In addition, 92% of Fellows reported that they care about the relationships they've built with their mentors. As one Fellow said, "I love how me and my mentor have created a bond where I can come in to vent to her if I'm ever feeling down or need more help with things." The culture of care also reaches guardians, as one parent expresses, "BRYC has become my extended family and village — I have partners in the work to help my son in his journey to be a more well-rounded individual and student."

Challenges

Estimates for the 2023-2024 school year show that 9.4 million students, or nearly 1 in 5 students, are chronically absent.

States' chronic absenteeism levels remain higher than pre-pandemic. Every state, including Washington, D.C., has experienced a substantial rise in chronic absenteeism rates when comparing the 2021-2022 school year to four years prior.

Adverse effects on students' educational trajectory. Chronic absenteeism in the early grades puts students at risk for delays in social skills, increased absenteeism in later grades, and grade retention. In middle and high school, academic consequences include negative impacts on high school graduation and enrolling in and persisting through college.

Consequences reaching into adulthood. Adverse academic outcomes — such as poor educational achievement and dropping out of school — that are associated with chronically absent students are also linked to long-term financial instability and limited social mobility, which are associated with poor mental and physical health.

Chronic absenteeism affects all students, but there are students who are more likely to be chronically absent. Due to root causes that intersect with the experiences of students with marginalized identities — including barriers to get to school, an aversion to and disengagement from school, and misconceptions about the impact of absences — students experiencing poverty, students of color, and students with disabilities are disproportionately more likely to be chronically absent.

Read [How Afterschool Programs are Building School-Day Engagement and Improving Attendance](#) to learn more.



Program history

BRYC was founded in 2009 by two Baton Rouge high school teachers who realized that their students faced tremendous barriers in attending and persisting through college, despite having the grades and qualifications to successfully do so. They founded BRYC with only 15 seniors, and by 2014, it grew to support 100 high school Fellows. While BRYC's initial focus was to build college readiness skills in upperclassmen, its leadership team has since realized that BRYC serves a greater purpose than solely academic support. Currently, BRYC not only provides educational support and enrichment to roughly 500 8th-12th graders across three locations (and career support to 750 alumni) but also serves as a space where Fellows can come to find community and support among each other and BRYC's committed and caring adults.

Recommendations

for more intentionally incorporating mentorship and adult support into afterschool programming:

- ▶ **Check in with program staff and volunteers regularly.** BRYC administers monthly and end-of-year mentor surveys to gauge what mentors need to show up as their best selves for their Fellows, and then provides the necessary supports. Promoting open feedback contributes to a more successful program and better outcomes for students.
- ▶ **Prioritize systems that align with your program's mission and support your staff and volunteers.** Intentional and thoughtful systems, such as the Culture Code, that support students, mentors, and program staff can set the tone for strong relationships.