

## REDUCING CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM



## R.E.A.C.H. After School Program

Skowhegan, Maine

230-250 Average number of students served

100% Students from low-income families

### Main funding sources:

- ▶ 21<sup>st</sup> Century Community Learning Centers
- ▶ Title I
- ▶ Maine Outdoor Learning Initiative grant
- ▶ CTE grant
- ▶ Community partners

## Inspiring learning and providing opportunities for young people to explore their passions and find what they excel in

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 R.E.A.C.H. After School Program (R.E.A.C.H.) — which stands for relationships, education, aspirations, community, and health — serves students in kindergarten through 8<sup>th</sup> grade, helping them reach their educational goals through play and exploration. The program provides a broad range of offerings for its students during the school year and summer, including theater, dance, cooking, gardening, sewing, and chess.

### A typical day for students

A typical day for R.E.A.C.H. students varies by grade level. However, decision-making and emotional regulation skill building are embedded throughout the programming. For R.E.A.C.H.'s kindergarten through 2<sup>nd</sup> graders, afterschool programming begins with time for movement and play before getting a "super snack" and learning about nutrition. After eating, students participate in "learning labs," a play-to-learn model that connects learning to future careers, with themes based on students' interests. Learning labs have included health, child care, and service fields. For example, in a lab focused on the restaurant industry, students played the roles of cooks, servers, and hosts. Math and reading were incorporated in the lab as exercises totaling bills, creating recipes, and reading menus.

Third through 5<sup>th</sup> graders have a mix of assigned and independent activities. On Monday and Tuesday, students engage in literacy and STEM activities that blend fun and academics, such as comic book writing, cooking, and robotics. On Wednesday and Thursday, students choose their activity, with many activities

requested and designed by students. Clubs include a rock collecting club, a Korean culture club, a horse club, and an adventure club. Programming for 6<sup>th</sup> through 8<sup>th</sup> grade students is entirely club-based, but students are required to attend at least two different clubs.

## Program characteristics

After the pandemic, R.E.A.C.H. staff noticed a decline in attendance, particularly for their older middle school youth, compared to pre-pandemic levels. They also noticed their students struggling to manage their emotions. In response, the program shifted to a club-based, trauma-responsive model, making the program more enticing to students and reflective of their needs. This included creating calm-down spaces, teaching students about dysregulation and strategies to self-regulate, and working to build up trusting relationships between students and staff.

While students help select and design club offerings, program staff align activities with school-day lessons by maintaining relationships with school-day staff, familiarizing themselves with state academic standards, and being aware of not only what their students are currently learning, but also what they should have learned previously and where they need additional support.

In addition to supporting school-day learning, clubs help students from kindergarten through 8<sup>th</sup> grade connect to future aspirations and potential career pathways. Whether it's writing a novel or learning about geology, students are able to form bonds with like-minded students and feel empowered to further explore their interests.

## Outcomes

R.E.A.C.H. has positively impacted their students' academic performance and received high remarks from parents. For example, at R.E.A.C.H.'s two elementary school sites, Bloomfield Elementary and Margaret Chase Smith School, a majority of students who regularly attended the program and had tested below grade level in reading improved their English language arts test scores (95% and 78%, respectively). Similarly, the majority of regularly attending students who tested below grade level in math saw gains in their math test scores (61%, all). Additionally, in a spring 2024 survey, parents reported that the program had increased their child's favorable attitudes toward school, connected their child to a caring adult, and increased their child's confidence and self-esteem. Parents also reported that they thought the program was doing a good job of providing learning in fun ways and connecting families to their child's school experience.

## 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

R.E.A.C.H. first began as a summer program in 2019 through the support of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century Community Learning Centers grant. The first summer, the program served 36 students. Over the past five years, the program has expanded in size and focus, now serving between 230 and 250 students annually during the school year and summer and providing trauma-responsive programming by employing developmentally appropriate program models such as play to learn, student voice and choice, and club-based.

## Recommendations

*for inspiring learning and providing opportunities for young people to explore their passions and find what they excel in:*

- ▶ **Think big! Don't be afraid to reimagine your program's offerings.** This might feel uncomfortable, but there's value in believing that creating something new is worth doing.
- ▶ **Be strategic in the way you pilot programming.** This includes having the framework mapped out, ensuring your team understands the goals and structure of the programming, and being specific about the follow-through and follow-up of its development. Continuously work to improve programming; it's okay to discard what isn't working for your program.
- ▶ **Develop meaningful and communicative relationships with school-day staff.** Attend staff meetings, go to school events, network with staff. Find ways to build connections and position your afterschool program staff as a resource.