

Laidlaw Leadership in Action Project: Exploring International Interventions for School Absence

Catherine James
Imperial College Laidlaw Scholar
Imperial College School of Medicine

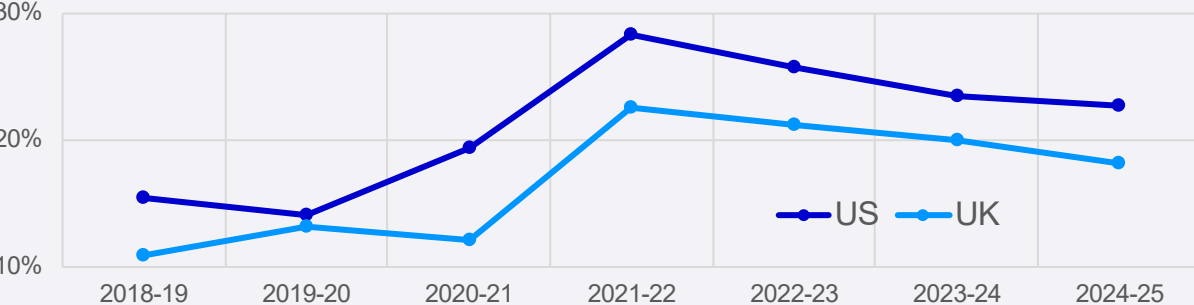
INTRODUCTION

My Leadership in Action provided the incredible opportunity to work with international leaders in education, public health and child wellbeing from Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine, the Bloomberg School of Public Health, Harvard University, the Rales Health Centre Baltimore, Kaiser Permanente and Attendance Works, a prominent US charity for school attendance.

EPIDEMIOLOGY

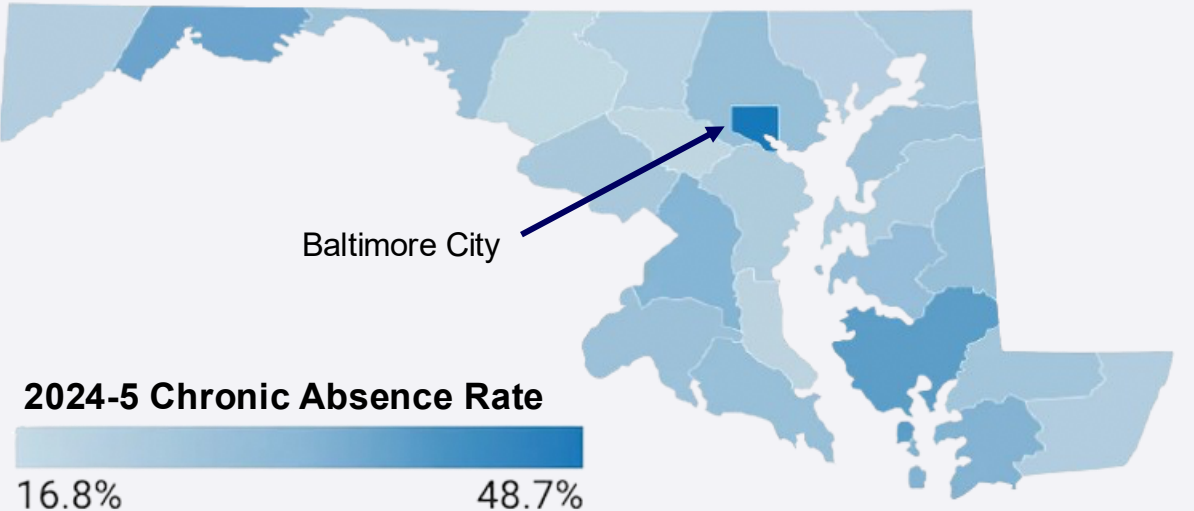
In the US, almost one in four children are chronically absent, missing over 10% of school days. School absence has risen significantly since pre-pandemic levels, reflecting a complex interplay of individual, health, family, school, social, economic and environmental factors.

Chronic Absence Rates: US vs UK



Year	US (%)	UK (%)
2018-19	15.0	10.0
2019-20	14.0	11.0
2020-21	19.0	12.0
2021-22	28.0	22.0
2022-23	26.0	21.0
2023-24	24.0	20.0
2024-25	23.0	19.0

Chronic Absence in Baltimore City



2024-5 Chronic Absence Rate

16.8% 48.7%

School-based health care



School clinic to meet health needs

Wellness, sports and nutrition to promote health

Chronic illness management to promote self-care

School climate and culture programmes to maximise school attendance

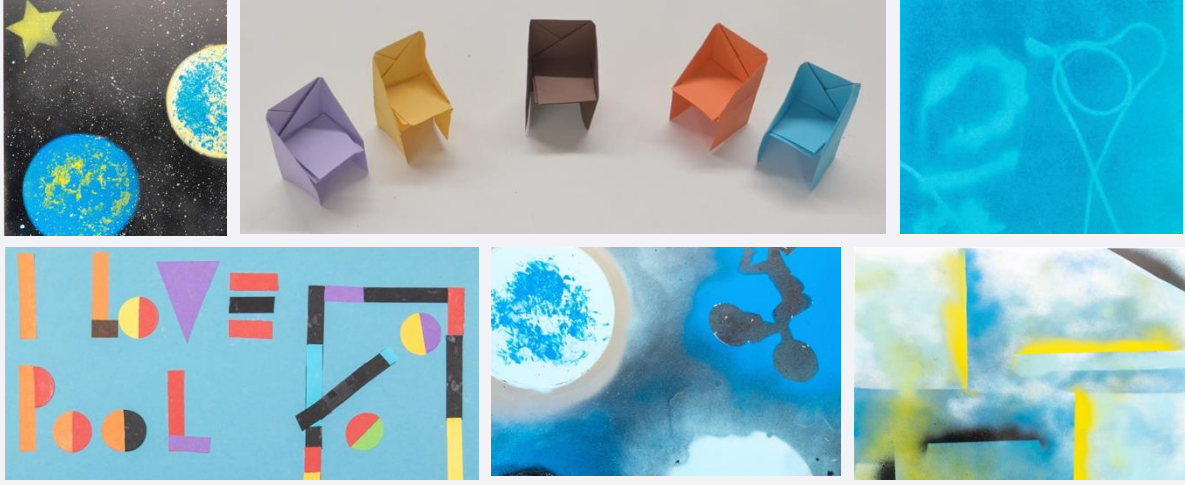
The Rales Health Centre, a Johns Hopkins Children's Centre programme in partnership with KIPP, is an innovative school-based healthcare model centred in the CDC's Whole School, Whole Community, Whole Child framework. Health, screening, wellness, vision, hearing, weight and oral health checks are offered with immunisations, behavioural, socioemotional, neurodevelopmental family support, and connection to local services. The Rales model reduces missed school days and hospital visits, generating over four dollars in net social benefit for every dollar invested.

Whole child support

Volunteering at the Rales Health Centre revealed how health, education, socioeconomic, structural and environmental factors shape attendance and wellbeing. In almost all cases, absence reflected broader unmet need, exclusion or inequity. By including cross-sector care within a school-based health centre, early, coordinated, context-sensitive support for the underlying determinants and health needs was provided without disruption to learning. In England, neighbourhood health centres offer a possible opportunity to implement this model.

Child voice and lived experience

In this leadership project, I observed how creative arts, reflective exercises and participatory methods are used to uncover the unheard voices of children who are persistently absent from school. Through sensitively facilitated sessions children are enabled to convey concerns often indirectly about their difficult experiences and the adverse impact of school systems, relationships and environments upon them, proposing how schools could be safer and more inclusive. Pull Up a Chair is a powerful metaphor for listening before intervention. By embracing the voices of children, this initiative reframes absence from an individual to a systemic, relational issue, helping children to identify trusted routes for disclosure in situations of complexity or conflict.



Pull Up a Chair young people's artwork. Sourced from Film 9: Finding solutions to prevent school exclusion in 2021-23.

KEY PRINCIPLES

School absence as a vital sign
Cross-sector partnership working
Strengths-based programmes

The US All in for Attendance framework presents school absence as a public health challenge and a shared outcome of the systems, relationships and environments surrounding a child, rather than an educational or behavioural concern. It argues that attendance data should be used as a vital sign of student and system wellbeing, identifying need early and guiding action using links with broader health and social data. It calls for cross-sector health, education, family, community and social care partnerships and a shift from punitive to strengths-based preventive and collaborative programmes that address the underlying causes of absence. The framework affirms observations that attendance reflects whether a child feels well enough, safe enough, included enough and supported enough to participate in school life.

15 States

Plan to cut 2022 chronic absence rates in half by 2027.

Integrated health education records

Working with colleagues in Nepal and the US, I contributed to a unified digital school health platform integrating health and education records, attendance, parent communication, school nursing input and referral information, to support earlier identification of need and better child-centred care. Adaptation to Nepal's rural inequity, uneven digital access and workforce constraints, was vital to ensure that the system was locally relevant, adaptable and equitable.

- ✓ 25000 student enrollments
- ✓ 17500 parent respondents
- ✓ 17000 school clinic visits



LEADERSHIP REFLECTIONS

In this Laidlaw Leadership Project, I have learned that leadership is the ethical responsibility to listen, learn, reflect, challenge assumptions and translate insights into meaningful action.

I have understood how school absence is a vital sign of child wellbeing, unmet need, inequity and the capacity of systems to support and include children, requiring public-health informed, cross-sector, preventive, strengths-based responses.

I have seen how powerful leaders walk with others, creating the agency, safety and trust for all voices to be heard, acting with integrity and accountability. Above all, I have realised that the most important insights into child wellbeing and learning in schools will only occur when the voices and lived realities of absent children are fully embraced to facilitate system growth, co-creating compassionate school communities in which all children can truly flourish.

I wish to express my sincere gratitude to all the children, families, health professionals, researchers and educationalists who have taught me so much. It has been the greatest privilege to work with you and to learn from your expertise.

2029

The projected year that the US will return to pre-pandemic school absence rates.

References available upon request.