Education Finance Committee Testimony

Northfield Public Schools: Attendance Pilot Initiative

February 2026
Northfield Public Schools

Overview

Northfield Public Schools appreciates the opportunity to share testimony regarding the impact of the district's Attendance Pilot Initiative, part of Minnesota's collaborative effort to strengthen student attendance and engagement across the state. Northfield's pilot demonstrates that targeted, systemic improvements in attendance frameworks yield measurable gains in consistency, equity, and student success.

District Context

Northfield Public Schools serves just under 4,000 students across five district schools. Our student population reflects the diversity and complexity of Minnesota's communities:

- 16% Hispanic
- 10% Students of Color
- 6% Multilingual Learners
- 20% Students receiving IEP services
- 29% Free and Reduced-Price Lunch
- 15% of students with a home language other than English

These demographics illustrate the need for equitable attendance systems that support students across cultural, linguistic, and economic lines, and that connect attendance improvement to broader district learning goals.

Original Vision:

The original vision for the attendance pilot program was to hire an attendance and family support liaison who would work with a specific cohort of secondary students at risk for chronic absenteeism. The role was designed to provide evidence-based attendance interventions, facilitate communication between home and school, coordinate community services, and support students and families experiencing barriers to regular attendance.

Realizations During Year One:

During the 2024–2025 school year, a review of attendance policies, procedures, and practices across all five district schools revealed a different and more pressing need. Students who are extremely chronically absent often already receive multiple layers of support, including special education evaluations and programming, social workers, school psychologists, school counselors, cultural liaisons, administrators, and, in some cases, county involvement. Introducing another person into these already complex support systems created confusion for many students and families.

What became clear was that we lacked a consistent, district-wide attendance framework. Practices varied across schools and grade levels, leading to inconsistencies in communication, documentation requirements, intervention thresholds, and data collection.

System Improvements:

In response, during 2024–2025, the attendance liaison reviewed, revised, and reduced the number of attendance codes used across the district and trained office support staff in each school on accurate and consistent coding practices. This work strengthened data integrity and improved our ability to monitor trends and respond effectively.

Following this work, a districtwide update to our attendance procedures was approved by the school board. The revised procedures include clearly defined absence thresholds that, when met, trigger specific, consistent actions for all students. Having the attendance liaison centrally monitor data and initiate these actions ensures equitable implementation across schools and families, and frees school attendance teams to take additional, targeted steps for students who require more intensive support or face significant barriers to regular attendance.

Evolution of the Role:

As a result, the role evolved during the 2025–2026 school year to focus on establishing and managing a unified district-wide attendance policy with clear, consistent parameters across all three school levels. This shift ensures consistent expectations and procedures for all families, standardized communication regarding absences and documentation, equitable implementation across all five schools, and centralized monitoring of attendance data and procedural compliance. The specific goal of our attendance pilot program is clear: 90% of students present at least 90% of the time.

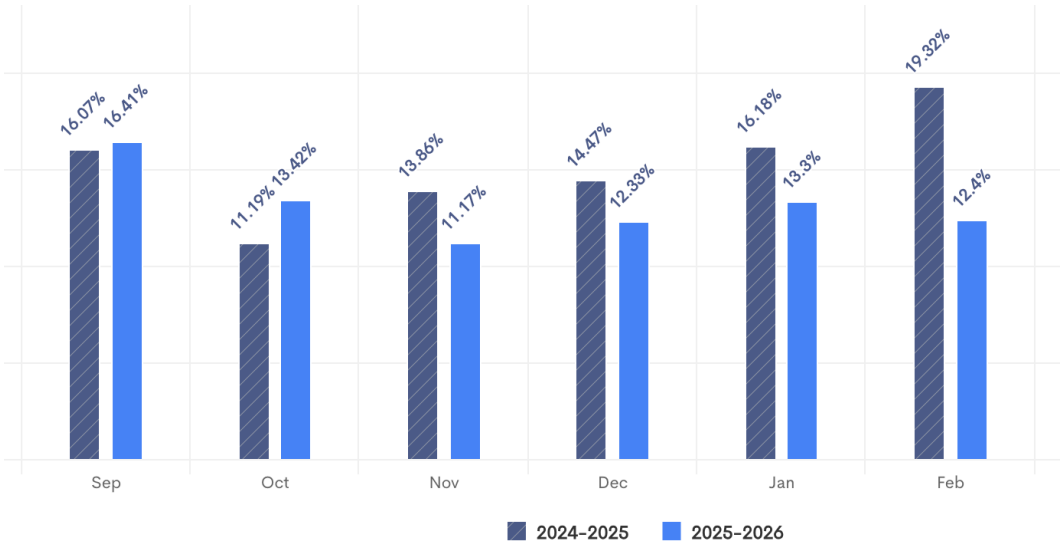
To effectively and consistently manage district attendance policies and procedures, these responsibilities must be coordinated by one individual serving the entire district. A dedicated attendance liaison is a key component of a strong district attendance plan. Centralizing this work ensures fidelity to policy, improves clarity and transparency for families, reduces duplication of effort, and frees school-based attendance teams to focus on meaningful, relationship-based interventions tailored to individual student needs. Attendance affects all other district systems and directly impacts district learning goals; it must be supported commensurate with its importance.

High School Attendance Mentor Program:

One successful strategy has been our high school attendance mentor program. Each teacher, counselor, administrator, or attendance team member is assigned one or more chronically absent student(s) to check-in with weekly to build relationships and accountability. These check-ins focus on encouragement and problem solving and have reduced punitive responses.

Results:

Since implementing these changes, chronic absenteeism in the district is down almost 7% year over year, demonstrating the impact of a coordinated, system-level approach to attendance.



Community Partnership:

Finally, chronic absenteeism is often influenced by complex factors beyond the school's control. Stronger partnerships with county and community agencies are essential to address issues such as mental health, housing instability, transportation, and medical needs. We are meeting regularly with Rice County to share our attendance strategies and identify additional support the county and community can provide to families.

Conclusion:

In Northfield, attendance improvement is not a standalone initiative—it is the foundation of academic success, equity, and efficient resource use. With statewide collaboration and dedicated district infrastructure, the Attendance Pilot is demonstrating that systemic coordination, consistent policy, and compassionate family support lead to higher engagement and better outcomes.

We encourage continued legislative support for:

- Dedicated district-level attendance coordination
- Modernized data systems
- Cross-agency collaboration
- Non-punitive family partnerships

These investments not only strengthen student learning and equity but also protect the financial and operational health of our public schools.

Thank you for your time and for your commitment to ensuring Minnesota students are present, supported, and ready to succeed.