

In-Depth Interview Summary

ECU Community School Attendance Team

Executive Summary

ECU Community School's reduction in chronic absenteeism appears to reflect a **coordinated, relationship-centered attendance system** rather than a single program or intervention. The school combines immediate family outreach, recurring review of student-level data, consistent attendance recognition, practical barrier removal, individualized support, and escalating accountability. Staff repeatedly described themselves as a **"school of action"** that follows through once a need or concern is identified.

The school's chronic absenteeism rate declined from approximately **39.5% in 2021–22 to 14.8% in 2024–25**, a reduction of nearly 25 percentage points. The 2024–25 rate was also substantially below the estimated rate for schools serving similar populations. The interview does not establish that any particular practice caused this improvement, but participants consistently attributed the change to several interacting factors:

1. Immediate, supportive contact when a student is absent
2. Weekly coordination among the executive director, social worker, and data manager
3. Consistent monitoring of excused and unexcused absences
4. Strong, long-standing relationships with students and families
5. Attendance incentives embedded throughout the school year
6. Individualized responses to transportation, food, housing, hygiene, and family-routine barriers
7. A structured, nurturing school environment that students want to attend
8. Whole-staff reflection, planning, communication, and follow-through
9. Family-engagement and resource partnerships through East Carolina University
10. Legal escalation only after supportive strategies have been attempted

The strongest theme was that **relationships help the school learn what is preventing attendance, but consistency and follow-through are what turn that knowledge into action.**

Interview Purpose and Participants

The interview was conducted as part of the AttendNC Bright Spots work to understand why ECU Community School had improved attendance beyond what might be expected based on its context. Participants included:

- **Dr. Tracy L. Cole**, executive director and former principal
- **Kristian Backman**, school social worker
- **Yvette Spells**, administrative assistant and data manager

All three participants had substantial institutional experience. Dr. Cole and Backman had served at the school for eight of its nine years, while Spells had been there since the school opened. Their longevity gave them a shared history with the school and long-standing relationships with many families.

The interview focused on the school's attendance routines, division of responsibilities, use of data, incentives, family engagement, barriers to attendance, and the organizational conditions that appear to support improvement.

School and Organizational Context

A University-Affiliated Lab School

ECU Community School is a laboratory school affiliated with East Carolina University's College of Education. Dr. Cole explained that North Carolina lab schools were established through legislation around the 2016–17 school year with three broad purposes:

- Improve outcomes for students attending low-performing schools or living in low-performing districts
- Provide growth opportunities for in-service and pre-service teachers
- Strengthen relationships between universities and public school units

ECU Community School is located on the same campus as South Greenville Elementary School and operates through a **school-within-a-school model**. Although the two schools share a campus, they are separate public school units with separate school codes.

Unlike a traditional school district governed by a local board of education, ECU Community School has an advisory board that receives information and provides input but does not hold final decision-making authority. The ECU chancellor serves in the statutory role comparable to a superintendent and may delegate responsibilities to the dean of the College of Education.

Dr. Cole's role also illustrates the small-system structure of the school. During her years as principal, she handled both school-level responsibilities and central-office functions such as federal programs, accountability, testing, and beginning-teacher support. Those roles were being separated as she transitioned to executive director and the school hired a principal.

Implications of the Lab-School Structure

The university affiliation provides access to institutional partners, business support, and specialized initiatives. Dr. Cole can work with the College of Education's business team when funding is needed for attendance incentives. The school also partnered with the College's Rural Education Institute to strengthen family engagement.

However, participants emphasized that many of the school's core practices are not dependent on substantial university resources. Daily announcements, positive phone calls, attendance certificates, basic tracking systems, morning greetings, and staff follow-through are low-cost practices that other schools could adopt.

Participants' Attendance Roles

Dr. Tracy L. Cole: Leadership, Policy, and Escalation

Dr. Cole provides leadership and oversight for the school's attendance work. Her responsibilities include:

- Developing and communicating school attendance procedures
- Ensuring attendance expectations are included in school handbooks
- Participating in weekly student discussions
- Conducting truancy meetings with families
- Reviewing student attendance histories and notification records
- Identifying funds for attendance incentives
- Filing truancy charges when other strategies have not worked

Importantly, Dr. Cole said the school does not wait until a student has accumulated a large number of absences. When a student reaches approximately three unexcused absences, the school may begin meeting with the family to review the attendance record, explain compulsory attendance requirements, identify barriers, and establish next steps.

Legal action is uncommon. Dr. Cole reported filing truancy charges only twice during her eight years at the school. This suggests that court involvement functions as a final escalation rather than the school's primary attendance strategy.

Kristian Backman: Family Outreach and Barrier Removal

Backman described herself as the school's **"boots on the ground."** Her role begins as early as the first absence. When Spells reports that a student is missing, Backman contacts the family to:

- Check on the student's well-being
- Determine whether the family needs assistance
- Begin building or reinforcing rapport
- Remind the family to provide documentation for illness
- Explain the attendance process when an absence is undocumented
- Identify barriers that may be interfering with attendance
- Connect the family with school or community resources

The initial communication is deliberately supportive rather than accusatory. Backman does not begin by chastising the family for an absence. She begins by asking whether the student is okay and whether the school can help.

That approach is not intended to eliminate accountability. Families are still informed about attendance expectations and possible next steps. However, the conversation starts from the assumption that the school should understand the situation before selecting a response.

Yvette Spells: Data, Documentation, Recognition, and Daily Visibility

Spells performs several central functions:

- Records and monitors daily attendance
- Alerts Backman when students are absent

- Reviews excused and unexcused absence patterns
- Identifies students who may require additional attention
- Maintains copies of attendance notification letters
- Communicates directly with students and parents
- Administers daily, weekly, monthly, and quarterly attendance recognition

Because Spells is often the first staff member students see in the morning, she also has a highly relational role. She notices when students return after an absence, encourages them to attend consistently, makes small attendance agreements with individual students, and reinforces improvement with personal praise and small rewards.

Her role demonstrates that the school does not separate data management from relationship-building. The person monitoring attendance numbers also knows the children and families represented in those numbers.

The School's Core Attendance System

1. Contact Begins After the First Absence

The school's response begins earlier than the formal three-, six-, and ten-day notification process. When a student misses one day, Spells generally informs Backman, who contacts the family.

The purpose of the first call is to:

- Check whether the child is safe and well
- Ask what happened
- Remind the family about submitting documentation
- Identify emerging needs
- Reinforce that the student is noticed and missed

This early response allows the school to distinguish an isolated illness from a pattern that may require support. It also prevents attendance communication from beginning only after the family receives a formal warning letter.

2. Formal Three-, Six-, and Ten-Day Notifications

Spells prepares attendance letters when students reach the required absence thresholds. She:

- Keeps a school copy
- Sends a copy to the family
- Gives a copy to Backman
- Maintains documentation for future meetings or court proceedings

The letters support compliance with compulsory attendance requirements, but they are integrated into a broader relational process. Dr. Cole and Backman can show families what notifications were provided and use the records to structure conversations about the student's attendance history.

3. Weekly Coordination

Dr. Cole and Backman meet weekly to discuss students, while Spells continuously communicates new concerns and data. Teachers also contribute information through grade-level conversations.

The weekly routine allows the team to:

- Review emerging and continuing concerns
- Compare formal attendance data with what staff know about the family
- Decide who should contact the student or caregiver
- Identify a practical support or intervention
- Monitor whether previous actions produced improvement
- Prepare for a truancy meeting when necessary

Participants did not describe a highly technical attendance platform. The strength appears to lie in the frequency with which information is exchanged and acted upon.

4. Strategic Midyear and End-of-Year Review

Spells conducts additional reviews around the midpoint of a semester. She examines each student's record and flags patterns that appear concerning, including students with substantial excused absences.

She may identify students who have missed more than approximately 12 days and discuss them with Backman. Students with high absence totals may also be placed "on the radar" for the following school year.

The staff also use an annual **plus-and-delta reflection process** to identify what worked and what needs to change. Attendance emerged as a schoolwide concern through this process. Staff then revisited the issue at the beginning of the next school year, established attendance meetings, and created action plans for students with elevated absences.

Dr. Cole described this shift toward greater intentionality as a turning point: **"When we became strategic, things began to shift."**

Attendance Recognition and Incentives

Attendance recognition is highly visible and occurs at multiple intervals.

Daily Recognition

The school's attendance slogan is:

"We are Pirates on time and on target for success."

During afternoon announcements, Spells shares:

- The number of students who were on time
- Which homerooms achieved perfect attendance
- Other positive attendance accomplishments

Students respond enthusiastically, particularly when their homeroom is recognized.

Weekly Recognition

Each Friday:

- The homeroom with the strongest attendance receives the Pirate Homeroom Attendance Award
- The certificate is displayed outside the classroom
- Students who were present and on time all week are entered into a prize drawing
- Selected students receive small prizes

The homeroom award introduces a collective element. Students and teachers take pride in their classroom's performance, and the competition is described as positive and motivating.

Monthly and Quarterly Recognition

Students with perfect monthly attendance receive certificates to take home. Backman also coordinates monthly attendance socials for qualifying students.

At the end of each nine-week period, the school recognizes:

- **Perfect attendance**
- **Excellent attendance**, including students who attended consistently but had a tardy

Students are recognized during awards ceremonies, allowing families to see that attendance is valued alongside academic and behavioral accomplishments.

Individualized Incentives

Spells also uses small, personalized agreements with students. She may tell a student who has been absent or frequently tardy that a small reward will be provided after a full week of on-time attendance.

These rewards are paired with direct encouragement, praise, hugs, and conversations with caregivers. The incentive is therefore not merely transactional. It represents personal recognition from an adult who notices the student's presence and improvement.

Primary Attendance Barriers

Participants described absenteeism as multicausal. They did not attribute the school's attendance challenges to a single student or family behavior.

Illness

Spells identified illness as the most common reason for absence. Some students are genuinely sick, and the school reminds families to obtain and submit medical documentation when absences extend beyond a brief period.

Family Priorities and Caregiver Responsibility

Dr. Cole also described cases in which caregivers did not consistently prioritize attendance. A minor complaint from a child might lead to an unnecessary day at home, or other family activities might take precedence over school.

The team does not interpret every absence as a structural barrier. In some cases, staff believe direct accountability and clearer expectations are necessary.

Food Insecurity

Food insecurity can affect attendance indirectly by disrupting sleep, morning routines, and family stability. Backman described students who struggled to get up because they had not eaten enough the night before or lacked breakfast. Families moving between residences may also lack consistent access to food.

The school responds through:

- An on-site food pantry
- Family food boxes
- Backpack Buddies weekend food
- Extended-break food boxes
- Referrals to community food banks
- A biweekly Beast Philanthropy food distribution held on campus

Housing and Financial Instability

Families may be:

- Moving from place to place
- Facing eviction
- Unable to pay utilities
- Experiencing inconsistent housing arrangements

Backman helps connect families with rent, utility, and other basic-needs resources. The school does not assume that a caregiver is unwilling to send a child to school when broader instability may be making regular attendance difficult.

Hygiene and Clothing Needs

The school maintains toiletries, towels, washcloths, deodorant, soap, and toothpaste in a private area near Backman's office. Students can clean up and prepare for class rather than remain home because they lack hygiene supplies or feel embarrassed.

The message to families is direct: send the child to school, and the school will help the student get ready for the day.

Transportation

The lab school can enroll students from throughout the district, which can create transportation complications. Dr. Cole described a family whose children were missing school partly because of where they lived. Once the school understood the problem, it worked with Pitt County Schools' transportation department to arrange a bus pickup. Attendance then improved substantially.

Family Routines

Some families have the physical means to reach school but struggle with bedtime, waking, or preparing several children.

The school has responded by:

- Helping families establish evening routines
- Encouraging earlier, age-appropriate bedtimes
- Suggesting that clothes be prepared the night before
- Providing an alarm clock
- Adjusting transportation arrangements when possible

These examples illustrate the school's tendency to select practical, sometimes very small responses based on the actual barrier rather than applying the same intervention to every family.

Older Children Providing Child Care

One student had accumulated substantial absences because she was staying home to help care for younger siblings. Staff discussed the issue with the family. Once the younger children were enrolled in school, the older student maintained strong attendance for the remainder of the year.

This example shows why direct conversation is necessary. The attendance data revealed the extent of the problem, but the data alone could not explain that the student was performing a child-care role within the family.

Individualized and Differentiated Support

Backman explicitly stated that different families require different responses.

For example:

- A parent whose work schedule conflicts with school arrival may need an earlier bus arrangement.
- A parent managing several young children may need an alarm clock and help establishing routines.
- A family experiencing food insecurity may need weekend food and break boxes.
- A student missing school because of hygiene concerns may need access to supplies at school.
- A family facing persistent noncompliance may need a formal truancy meeting and stronger accountability.

The school's practice is to ask families what is happening rather than beginning with a predetermined explanation.

Staff also use different relationships strategically. One family may feel most comfortable talking with Spells, while another may disclose concerns to Backman, a teacher, or Dr. Cole. The school does not insist that every case move through the same staff member when another trusted relationship is more productive.

Relationships With Families

Families as Experts

A central phrase repeated during the interview was that **families are the experts on their children**. Staff communicate that they want to work with families rather than make decisions for them without understanding their circumstances.

This stance appears to serve several functions:

- It lowers defensiveness.
- It makes families more willing to disclose barriers.
- It permits more direct conversations later.
- It positions the school and family as partners.
- It reinforces shared responsibility for attendance.

Backman said families can remain receptive during difficult conversations because staff have “led with their hearts” and demonstrated that they are trying to help rather than attack them.

Positive Contact at the Beginning of the Year

Dr. Cole recommended that relationship-building begin during teacher workdays, before the first problem arises.

Teachers contact families to:

- Introduce themselves
- Express enthusiasm about teaching the child
- Explain what families can expect
- Ask what they should know about the student
- Establish a positive connection before open house

By the time families arrive at open house, they have already spoken with the teacher. This allows the initial face-to-face interaction to reinforce a positive relationship rather than begin with a concern or complaint.

Dr. Cole also encourages teachers to continue sharing positive information throughout the year, even when the accomplishment is small. Families should not hear from the school only when their child has done something wrong.

Enhanced Family-Engagement Sessions

Through a partnership with the College of Education’s Rural Education Institute, the school expanded its family-engagement sessions. Dr. Cole reported that family participation had already been strong, at approximately 70%, but the partnership allowed the school to increase the frequency and depth of the sessions.

Events included:

- Academic information
- Mental-health awareness
- Access to community resources
- Catered meals

Dr. Cole viewed these sessions as another way to demonstrate that the school sees and responds to families' broader needs.

Student Belonging and the School Environment

Participants did not describe attendance improvement solely as the result of monitoring and intervention. They also emphasized creating a school students want to attend.

Dr. Cole described ECU Community School as:

- Hands-on rather than “sit and get”
- Structured and predictable
- Loving and nurturing
- Relational across grades
- Clear about expectations
- Small enough for adults and students to know one another

Older students know younger students by name, and teachers know children beyond their own grade levels. Current students help new students understand school norms, sometimes telling them, “We do not do that here.”

Adults are positioned throughout the arrival process:

- At the car line
- At bus entrances
- At walking entrances
- At classroom doors

These greetings provide both a welcoming routine and an opportunity to conduct a rapid emotional check. Staff may notice a change in a student's affect and ask what is happening before the issue develops into a larger attendance concern.

Participants repeatedly said that students love coming to school, with Spells noting that some try to attend even when they are sick. While that statement should not be interpreted as a formal measure of school climate, it reflects staff members' perception that belonging and relationships contribute to attendance.

Staff Stability as a Condition for Success

Dr. Cole identified low staff turnover as an important contextual factor. ECU Community School serves a high-need population, with more than 85% of students reportedly receiving free or reduced-price lunch

and approximately 20% identified as students with disabilities. Despite those conditions, the staff has remained relatively stable.

That continuity allows:

- Teachers to know siblings and extended family members
- Families to maintain relationships with the same adults over multiple years
- Staff to develop shared attendance routines
- Team members to communicate efficiently
- Institutional knowledge to accumulate
- Students to encounter familiar adults throughout the school

The school's experience suggests that staff continuity may strengthen both the relational and operational sides of attendance work.

At the same time, Dr. Cole argued that schools experiencing turnover do not have to wait years before beginning. They can start by making positive family contact before school begins and maintaining that communication throughout the year.

Why the Approach Appears to Work

1. Attendance Is Addressed Early

The school does not wait until a student formally meets the chronic absenteeism threshold. Contact begins after the first absence, and formal processes intensify at three, six, and ten days.

2. Data Are Connected to People

Spells monitors attendance but also knows students and families personally. Quantitative patterns are interpreted alongside teacher observations, morning interactions, family conversations, and prior history.

3. Responsibility Is Distributed

Attendance work is not assigned to one person:

- Spells monitors and documents.
- Backman contacts families and coordinates support.
- Dr. Cole provides leadership and escalation.
- Teachers share information and build relationships.
- University and community partners provide additional resources.

4. Interventions Match the Barrier

The school distinguishes between:

- Illness
- Transportation

- Food insecurity
- Housing instability
- Hygiene needs
- Caregiving responsibilities
- Family routines
- Caregiver noncompliance

The response is selected after the cause is better understood.

5. Support and Accountability Are Combined

Families receive material assistance, flexibility, and respectful communication. They also receive letters, meetings, clear expectations, and, in rare cases, legal consequences.

The approach is therefore neither entirely supportive nor primarily punitive. It can be characterized as **relational, practical, persistent, and accountable**.

6. Positive Attendance Is Made Visible

Daily announcements, classroom competition, certificates, socials, awards, and social-media recognition communicate that attendance matters. Recognition occurs frequently enough to keep attendance salient rather than limiting it to an end-of-year award.

7. The School Follows Through

The “school of action” theme may be the most important organizational mechanism. Staff emphasized that plans are communicated, responsibilities are carried out, and efforts continue long enough for new routines to become established.

Replication Considerations

Practices That Appear Highly Transferable

Many of the practices could be adopted with limited funding:

- Same-day supportive outreach
- Weekly attendance review
- Positive family contact before school begins
- Daily attendance announcements
- Homeroom recognition
- Certificates and social-media recognition
- Midyear review of student-level absence patterns
- End-of-year plus-and-delta reflection

- Morning greetings at entry points
- Individualized attendance goals
- Clear staff communication and division of responsibility

Practices Dependent on Local Capacity

Some features may be more difficult to replicate:

- Long-term staff continuity
- The small school size
- A dedicated social worker with established family relationships
- University-affiliated family-engagement resources
- Access to College of Education business support
- On-site food distribution and pantry capacity
- The ability to coordinate transportation across a broad enrollment area

Even so, participants emphasized that affiliation and funding do not explain all of the school's work. Much of the approach depends more on protected time, creativity, communication, and implementation discipline than on expensive programs.

Time as a Resource

Spells noted that many recognition activities require little money but substantial time. She works alone in the office and holds multiple responsibilities but still maintains the attendance routines. Backman makes time for monthly attendance socials, while Dr. Cole plans and attends family meetings.

The model should therefore not be described as cost-free. It relies heavily on staff time, attention, and willingness to maintain routines consistently.

Limitations of the Interview Evidence

The interview provides a detailed account of staff perceptions and practices, but several cautions are important:

- It does not establish that the described practices caused the attendance reduction.
- The interview included three long-serving staff members but did not include teachers, students, or caregivers.
- Several practices were described through examples rather than formal implementation records.
- The school's small size and university affiliation may influence how the approach operates.
- Staff perceptions that students "love to come to school" were not supported by student survey data during the interview.
- The relative contribution of incentives, barrier removal, family engagement, school climate, and formal attendance procedures cannot be separated from this interview alone.

These limitations do not diminish the value of the practices described, but they suggest that additional interviews, observations, and artifact review would strengthen conclusions about what is most distinctive and transferable.

Overall Interpretation for the Bright-Spots Work

ECU Community School's promising practice is best understood as a **small-school attendance ecosystem built around relationships, visibility, rapid response, and follow-through.**

The school has created a process in which:

1. An absence is noticed quickly.
2. A family receives a supportive call.
3. Attendance data are monitored over time.
4. Formal letters document escalating concern.
5. Staff ask what is actually preventing attendance.
6. A practical response is matched to the barrier.
7. Students receive frequent recognition for attendance and improvement.
8. Teachers and families receive consistent communication.
9. The school creates a structured and welcoming environment.
10. The team continues following up until the pattern changes or stronger accountability is required.

The most distinctive feature may not be any one incentive, meeting, or family support. It is the interaction of these practices and the consistency with which they are carried out.

A concise statement of the school's approach would be:

Know the child and family, notice absences immediately, ask what is getting in the way, respond with something practical, recognize improvement, and follow through on every commitment.