Addressing Chronic Absenteeism: School Nurses Leading for Change
CSHS Session 3 – Felicity Crawford's Slide Notes

Addressing Chronic Absenteeism: Equitable Solutions through MTSS, Focusing on Trauma, Immigration, and Tier 3 Supports

I. Introduction
- Nearly **one in five Massachusetts students** had missed at least 10% of scheduled school days through March of 2023 (Boston Globe).
- "96% of Massachusetts students with high attendance in 10th grade graduate from high school in 4 years, while **only 69% of students with low attendance in 10th grade graduate in 4 years**." (Source: Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education)

Our Ethical Responsibility
- A fundamental tenet guiding our conversation is the principle of equal access to free public education for all students.
- This means, according to the state of MA, that regardless of race, color, sex, gender identity, religion, national origin, sexual orientation, disability, or immigration status, every child is entitled to an equitable educational experience.
- Schools bear the unwavering responsibility to uphold this right and to actively avoid any policies or practices that might discourage or deny school access based on immigration or citizenship status.

Factors That Can Impede Educational Equity
- Equity itself, defined as **access to the resources and opportunities essential for success**
- Pervasive effects of **trauma**
- Burdens of **poverty**
- Systemic realities of **racism**
- Vulnerabilities faced by unauthorized immigrants, including the ever-present fear of deportation
  - These are not discrete issues, but rather a **constellation of interconnected experiences that deeply affect a child's capacity to thrive**.

Prerequisites for Learning
- The four foundations of learning are **belonging**, **well-being**, **engagement**, and **expression** (Source: Ontario Public Service).
- **Well-being**, though lacking one universally accepted definition, is generally understood to encompass positive emotions like contentment and happiness, the absence of negative emotions such as depression and anxiety, life satisfaction, a sense of fulfillment, and positive functioning (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, August 3, 2022).
  - Well-being includes the following aspects:
    - Physical well-being
    - Social well-being
    - Psychological well-being
    - Economic well-being
    - Development and activity

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- Emotional well-being
- Life satisfaction
- Domain-specific satisfaction
- Engaging activities and work
  - For more on well-being: What Is Wellbeing?
- **Equity**: To ensure the prerequisites to learning means all children should have **unfettered access to resources and opportunities** to thrive.
- It's crucial to acknowledge the central role of school nurses in making this work a reality. You are the linchpins in identifying needs, coordinating care, and building strong partnerships to support our most vulnerable students.

II. Factors Impacting School Attendance: Trauma, Poverty, and Racism

Video Clip – The Raising of America - Episode 4: Wounded Places (0:51 - 3:41)
- *The Raising of America: Early Childhood and the Future of Our Nation* is a five-part documentary series that explores how a strong start for all our kids can lead to a healthier, stronger and more equitable nation.
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Sociopolitical Factors
- Opportunity Gaps
  - Unequal and inequitable distribution of resources and experiences on the basis of nine factors: race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, English proficiency, immigration status, community wealth, familial situations, geography, and disability status (Source: The National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine)

Trauma: Understanding the Impact on School Attendance
- **Defining Trauma:** Trauma results from an event, series of events, or set of circumstances that is experienced by an individual as physically or emotionally harmful or life-threatening and that has lasting adverse effects on the individual's functioning and mental, physical, social, emotional, or spiritual well-being (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration [SAMHSA], 2014). It's crucial to understand that trauma is not solely defined by the event itself, but rather by the *individual's experience* and interpretation of it. This includes experiences of:
  - **Abuse:** Physical, emotional, and sexual abuse.
  - **Neglect:** Physical and emotional neglect.
  - **Violence:** Witnessing or experiencing domestic violence, community violence, or school violence.
  - **Accidents and Natural Disasters:** Experiencing or witnessing accidents, fires, floods, or other natural disasters.
  - **Medical Trauma:** Serious illnesses, surgeries, or medical procedures, especially in childhood.
  - **Family Separation:** Separation from caregivers due to various reasons, including parental incarceration, hospitalization, or deportation. *This is particularly relevant to the context of unauthorized immigration.*

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- o **Historical Trauma:** Cumulative emotional and psychological wounding over generations, originating from massive group trauma. *This can be relevant for refugee and some immigrant populations.*

Poverty's Impact on Attendance

Poverty significantly impacts school attendance in numerous ways:

- **Lack of Basic Resources**
  - o **Food Insecurity:** Students experiencing food insecurity may miss school due to hunger, lack of energy, or needing to work to help support their families. This can lead to difficulty concentrating and learning, making school less appealing.
  - o **Lack of Adequate Clothing:** Not having appropriate clothing (e.g., warm winter clothes, shoes that fit) can prevent students from attending school, especially during inclement weather.
  - o **Transportation Barriers:** Lack of reliable transportation (e.g., access to public transportation, a working vehicle) can make it difficult for students to get to school, especially in areas with limited public transportation options.
- **Housing Instability**
  - o **Homelessness:** Students experiencing homelessness may face significant challenges attending school regularly due to lack of a stable address, difficulty accessing transportation, and the stress of their living situation.
  - o **Frequent Moves:** Frequent moves can disrupt a student's education, leading to missed school days, difficulty building relationships with peers and teachers, and academic setbacks.
- **Limited Access to Healthcare**
  - o **Physical Health:** Lack of access to regular medical care can lead to untreated health conditions that cause students to miss school.
  - o **Mental Health:** Poverty is associated with increased risk of mental health problems, such as anxiety, depression, and PTSD, which can contribute to school refusal and absenteeism.

Connecting Poverty to Trauma and Mental Health: Poverty creates a context of chronic stress and adversity, which can significantly increase vulnerability to trauma. For example:

- Children living in poverty may be more likely to witness or experience violence in their communities.
- Families experiencing economic hardship may face increased stress and conflict, which can lead to child maltreatment.
- The chronic stress of poverty can also directly impact brain development and emotional regulation, increasing the risk of mental health problems.

Racism's Impact on Attendance

Experiences of racism create a hostile and unwelcoming school environment, which can lead to absenteeism:

- **Microaggressions:** Everyday slights, insults, or subtle forms of discrimination can create a sense of alienation and make students feel unwelcome in school.

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- **Discrimination:** Overt acts of discrimination, such as being treated unfairly by teachers or administrators because of their race or ethnicity, can lead to distrust and disengagement from school.
- **Systemic Inequities:** Systemic racism, such as unequal funding for schools in predominantly minority neighborhoods, can result in fewer resources, larger class sizes, and less experienced teachers, which can negatively impact student engagement and attendance.
- **Racial Trauma:** Experiences of racism can be traumatic, leading to symptoms of PTSD, anxiety, and depression. This trauma can make it difficult for students to feel safe and comfortable in the school environment, leading to absenteeism.

Intersection of Racism, Poverty, and Immigration Status: For students of color who are also unauthorized immigrants, the effects of racism and poverty are compounded by the stress and fear associated with their immigration status:
- They may experience discrimination based on their race, ethnicity, *and* immigration status.
- Poverty can exacerbate the challenges associated with being unauthorized, such as limited access to resources and increased vulnerability to exploitation.

Impact on Brain Development, Emotional Regulation, and Behavior: Trauma, especially during childhood, can have profound and lasting effects on brain development (van der Kolk, 2014). The stress response system becomes chronically activated, leading to:
- **Impaired Emotional Regulation:** Difficulty managing emotions, leading to outbursts, irritability, anxiety, or withdrawal.
- **Cognitive Difficulties:** Difficulty concentrating, focusing, remembering information, and making decisions. This directly impacts academic performance and engagement.
- **Behavioral Issues:** Increased risk of externalizing behaviors (aggression, defiance, impulsivity) and internalizing behaviors (anxiety, depression, social withdrawal).
- **Hypervigilance and Heightened Startle Response:** A constant state of alert, making it difficult to relax and feel safe in the school environment.
- **Impact on Attachment:** Trauma can disrupt attachment bonds, leading to difficulties forming healthy relationships with peers and adults at school.
- *These impacts directly contribute to school absenteeism by making it difficult for students to cope with the demands of the school environment.*

Trauma Associated with Unauthorized Immigration Status and Fear of Deportation/Family Separation
Unauthorized immigration status and the constant threat of deportation create a state of chronic stress and fear, often referred to as "toxic stress" (Shonkoff et al., 2012). This is further compounded by the potential for family separation, which is a deeply traumatic event for children (Brabeck & Rodriguez, 2018).
- **Fear and Anxiety:** Children may experience constant worry about their own deportation or the deportation of family members. This fear can be paralyzing and make it difficult to focus on schoolwork.
- **Family Separation as Trauma:** The actual separation from a parent or other family member due to deportation is a significant traumatic event, leading to grief, loss, anxiety, depression, and PTSD.
- **Impact on Trust and Safety:** The fear of deportation can erode trust in authority figures, including school staff, making it difficult for students to seek help or support.

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- **Economic Hardship and Instability:** Deportation often leads to significant economic hardship for families, which can further destabilize the child's life and impact their ability to attend school consistently.
- **Mental Health Consequences:** Studies have shown that children of unauthorized immigrants experience higher rates of anxiety, depression, and PTSD (Suárez-Orozco et al., 2015; Perreira & Ornelas, 2011).
- *These mental health challenges often manifest as school refusal.*

Video Clip – The Raising of America - Episode 4: Wounded Places (11:52 - 16:03)
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III. School Refusal and Serious Emotional Disturbance (SED)

School Refusal
- **Definition:** School refusal behavior is more than just skipping school. It's when a child or adolescent experiences significant difficulty attending school, often accompanied by emotional distress. This distress can manifest as anxiety, fear, panic attacks, or even physical symptoms like stomachaches or headaches.
- **Key features**
    - **Emotional distress:** The child experiences real and significant distress related to attending school.
    - **Parental knowledge:** Unlike truancy, parents are usually aware of the child's refusal to go to school.
    - **Staying at home:** The child typically stays home with parental knowledge, rather than wandering or engaging in delinquent behavior.
- **Why it happens:** School refusal can stem from various underlying reasons:
    - **Anxiety:** This could be separation anxiety, social anxiety, test anxiety, or fear of bullying.
    - **Avoiding negative experiences:** The child might be trying to avoid academic difficulties, social problems, or negative interactions with teachers or peers.
    - **Seeking attention:** In some cases, school refusal can be a way for a child to seek attention from parents or caregivers.
    - **Positive reinforcement at home:** The child might find staying home more rewarding than being at school (e.g., access to video games, less demanding environment).
- **Differentiation from Truancy:** Truancy is typically characterized by unexcused absences where the student is deliberately skipping school without parental knowledge. School refusal, on the other hand, often involves parental knowledge and significant emotional distress related to attending school.

Types of School Refusal
While there isn't one universally accepted typology, common presentations include:

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- **Anxiety-Based:** Driven by significant anxiety or fear related to school, such as separation anxiety, social anxiety, or specific phobias (e.g., fear of bullying, tests, public speaking).
- **Avoidance of Social Situations:** Difficulty navigating social interactions, leading to avoidance of social situations at school (e.g., lunch, recess, group projects).
- **Pursuit of Tangible Reinforcement:** Staying home is more appealing than being at school, as it offers access to preferred activities (e.g., video games, spending time with family).
- **Avoidance of Negative Affect:** Student wants to avoid negative emotions associated with school, such as academic failure, peer rejection, or teacher criticism.

Impact of School Refusal on Students

School refusal can have significant negative consequences:

- **Academic Decline:** Missed instruction leads to gaps in learning and lower academic achievement.
- **Social Isolation:** Reduced interaction with peers can lead to social difficulties and feelings of loneliness.
- **Increased Risk of Mental Health Problems:** School refusal can exacerbate existing mental health conditions or contribute to the development of new ones, such as anxiety disorders, depression, and social phobia.
- **Long-Term Impact:** Without intervention, school refusal can lead to chronic absenteeism, school dropout, and difficulties transitioning to adulthood.

SED Under IDEA

- **Definition:** Under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), Serious Emotional Disturbance (SED) is defined as a condition exhibiting one or more of the following characteristics over a long period of time, to a marked degree, that adversely affects a child's educational performance:
    1. An inability to learn that cannot be explained by intellectual, sensory, or health factors.
    2. An inability to build or maintain satisfactory interpersonal relationships with peers and teachers.
    3. Inappropriate types of behavior or feelings under normal circumstances.
    4. A general pervasive mood of unhappiness or depression.
    5. A tendency to develop physical symptoms or fears associated with personal or school problems.

Key Criteria of Serious Emotional Disorders

When we talk about social-emotional disorders (SED), it's not just about *what* behaviors or emotions a student exhibits, but also *how often*, *for how long*, and *how strongly* they experience them. These three factors—frequency, duration, and intensity—help us understand the severity and impact of the disorder.

1. Frequency:

- Definition: Frequency refers to *how often* a specific behavior or emotional response occurs.
- In SED: A student with an SED might experience certain emotions or exhibit certain behaviors more frequently than their peers.
- *Example:* A student with anxiety might experience panic attacks several times a week, while a student with oppositional defiant disorder (ODD) might have frequent outbursts of anger or defiance daily.

- Importance: High frequency can disrupt a student's learning, social interactions, and overall well-being. It also indicates that the issue is persistent and not just a one-time occurrence.

2. Duration:
- Definition: Duration refers to *how long* a specific behavior or emotional response lasts.
- In SED: The length of time a student experiences an emotion or engages in a behavior can be a key indicator of an SED.
- *Example:* A student feeling sad for a day or two after a disappointment is typical. However, a student experiencing persistent sadness and hopelessness for weeks or months may be experiencing depression. Similarly, a brief tantrum is different from prolonged periods of aggression or defiance.
- Importance: Longer duration suggests that the student is struggling to regulate their emotions or behaviors and that the issue is significantly impacting their functioning.

3. Intensity:
- Definition: Intensity refers to *how strong* a specific behavior or emotional response is.
- In SED: The strength or magnitude of an emotion or behavior can distinguish typical reactions from those indicative of an SED.
- *Example:* Feeling nervous before a test is normal. However, experiencing overwhelming panic that prevents a student from even entering the classroom indicates a higher intensity of anxiety. Similarly, occasional disagreements with peers are different from frequent, intense arguments that lead to physical fights.
- Importance: High intensity can be particularly disruptive and distressing for the student and those around them. It can also indicate a greater need for immediate intervention.

How these factors interact:
These three factors often interact to determine the overall impact of an SED. For example:
- High frequency, long duration, and high intensity: This combination indicates a severe and significantly impairing disorder.
- Low frequency, short duration, and low intensity: This may be within the range of typical behavior or a mild, transient issue.
- High frequency, short duration, and high intensity: This could indicate explosive or impulsive behaviors that, while brief, are highly disruptive.

In the context of school refusal: These factors are crucial for understanding the severity of school refusal:
- Frequency: How many days or parts of days is the student refusing to attend school?
- Duration: How long has the school refusal been going on (days, weeks, months)?
- Intensity: How distressed is the student when faced with attending school? Do they experience panic attacks, severe anxiety, or other significant emotional or physical symptoms?

Many students with SED experience significant anxiety, depression, or trauma-related symptoms that can manifest as school refusal. For example, a student with social anxiety disorder may refuse to attend school to avoid social interactions. A student with PTSD may experience flashbacks or panic attacks triggered by school-related stimuli, leading to avoidance.

Video Clip – The Raising of America - Episode 4: Wounded Places (22:09 - 27:58)
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School Nurse's Role (within MTSS)
- **Identifying Patterns:** School nurses are crucial in identifying patterns of absences and considering potential underlying causes, including physical health concerns, mental health issues, and family stressors.
- **Health Screenings and Assessments:** This includes conducting health screenings and assessments, including mental health screenings (e.g., using standardized questionnaires for anxiety or depression).
- **Communication:** Effective communication with parents/guardians and school staff is essential for sharing information, coordinating care, and developing collaborative solutions.
- **Connecting Families with Resources:** School nurses can connect families with appropriate resources within the MTSS framework, including school counselors, social workers, mental health providers, and community organizations.

IV. The Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) and School Refusal

Foundational Principles
MTSS is a preventative, multi-tiered framework that provides increasing levels of support based on student need. It emphasizes early intervention, data-based decision making, and collaboration among stakeholders.

Tier 1: Universal Supports (Prevention)
- **Core Elements:**
  - **Positive School Climate:** Creating a safe, welcoming, and inclusive school environment.
  - **School-Wide PBIS:** Implementing school-wide systems to promote positive behavior and prevent problem behaviors.
  - **SEL Programs:** Providing explicit instruction in social and emotional skills.
  - **Mental Health Awareness and Promotion:** Activities that promote mental health and reduce stigma.
- **Connection to School Refusal Prevention:** These universal supports create a foundation that can reduce the likelihood of school refusal by addressing risk factors for all students.

Tier 2: Targeted Interventions (Early Intervention)
- **Examples:**
  - **Small Group Counseling:** Providing targeted support and skill-building in small groups.
  - **Check-in/Check-out Systems:** Providing regular check-ins with a designated staff member to monitor attendance and provide support.
  - **Mentoring Programs:** Pairing students with positive role models.
  - **Targeted Social Skills Groups:** Providing explicit instruction in social skills.
  - **Parent Support Groups:** Offering support and resources to parents.
- **Transition to Tier 3:** While Tier 2 interventions are effective for many students, some will require more intensive, individualized support at Tier 3, especially those with complex trauma or SED.

Tier 3: Intensive, Individualized Supports (Addressing Complex Needs)

- **Focus:** Tier 3 is for students with the most significant needs, those whose challenges are resistant to Tier 1 and 2 interventions.
- **Key Components:**
    - **Comprehensive Functional Behavior Assessment (FBA):** A process for identifying the function (purpose) of the school refusal behavior. This involves gathering data from multiple sources (e.g., student interviews, parent interviews, observations) to understand *why* the student is refusing school.
    - **Highly Individualized Behavioral Intervention Plans (BIPs):** Plans developed based on the FBA that outline specific strategies to address the function of the behavior and promote positive change.
    - **Intensive Individual Therapy:** Providing individual therapy, potentially including trauma-informed approaches, to address underlying emotional and behavioral issues.
    - **Wraparound Services:** Coordinating multiple services across different systems (school, home, community mental health, social services, legal aid, immigration support services) to provide comprehensive support.
    - **Case Management:** A dedicated case manager coordinates Tier 3 services, facilitates communication between stakeholders, and advocates for the student and family.
    - **Collaboration with Community Mental Health Providers and Other Community Organizations:** Working closely with psychiatrists, therapists, legal aid organizations, immigrant support groups, and other community-based professionals who can address the specific needs of immigrant and refugee families.

V. Addressing the Unique Needs of Immigrant and Refugee Students

Mental Health Challenges of Immigrant/Refugee Populations

Immigrant and refugee students face a multitude of stressors that can significantly impact their mental health and, consequently, their school attendance. These include:

- **Pre-Migration Trauma:** Many refugees and some immigrants have experienced trauma before arriving in the U.S., such as war, violence, persecution, or forced displacement ([Fazel et al., 2016](#)). This trauma can manifest as PTSD, anxiety, depression, and other mental health conditions.
    - *Example:* A study by [Smid et al. (2011)](#) with refugee youth resettled in the U.S. found that 40% met criteria for PTSD.
- **Acculturation Stress:** The process of adapting to a new culture can be stressful, involving language barriers, cultural differences, and feelings of isolation ([Suárez-Orozco et al., 2018](#)).
    - *Example:* A study by [Hovey & King (1996)](#) found that acculturative stress was associated with higher levels of depressive symptoms among Latino immigrant adolescents.
- **Language Barriers:** Difficulty communicating in English can lead to academic difficulties, social isolation, and feelings of frustration.
- **Family Separation:** Separation from family members due to migration processes can be a significant source of stress and trauma, particularly for children.
- **Fear of Deportation:** The constant fear of deportation, either for themselves or family members, creates a state of chronic stress and anxiety, especially for unauthorized immigrants.

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- o *Example:* A study by Eskenazi et al. (2019) found that children with unauthorized immigrant parents experienced higher levels of anxiety and fear related to family separation.
  - **Discrimination:** Experiences of discrimination and prejudice can lead to feelings of isolation, low self-esteem, and mental health problems.
    - o *Example:* A study by Lopez et al. (2016) found that perceived discrimination was associated with increased risk of depression among Latino immigrant youth.

Unauthorized Immigration: Heightened Vulnerability

Students who are unauthorized immigrants and those with unauthorized family members face additional stressors:

- **Constant Fear of Deportation:** This fear can be a constant source of anxiety and trauma, impacting their ability to concentrate in school and feel safe.
- **Limited Access to Resources:** Unauthorized immigrants often face barriers to accessing healthcare, mental health services, and other social services.
- **Economic Hardship:** Fear of deportation can limit employment opportunities and lead to economic hardship, which can further impact the family's well-being and the student's ability to attend school.

Specific Examples of Adapted Tier 3 Supports

- **Therapy in Native Language:** Providing therapy in the student's native language is crucial for effective communication and building trust.
- **Culturally Competent Therapists:** Working with therapists who understand the cultural context of the student's experiences is essential.
- **Referrals to Legal Aid Organizations:** Connecting families with legal aid organizations specializing in immigration law can help address legal concerns and reduce stress.
- **Assistance Navigating Complex Systems:** Providing assistance navigating complex systems (e.g., healthcare, social services) can help families access needed resources.

Building Trust and Confidentiality: It is essential to emphasize the importance of building trust and ensuring confidentiality with unauthorized immigrant students and their families. This includes explaining confidentiality policies and assuring them that information will not be shared with immigration authorities.

Integrating Cultural Competency into School Nurse Interventions

Cultural competency is essential for providing effective care to immigrant and refugee students. Practical strategies include:

- **Using Interpreters:** Using qualified interpreters when communicating with families who do not speak English fluently.
- **Understanding Cultural Differences in Communication Styles:** Being aware of cultural differences in communication styles, such as directness, eye contact, and personal space.
- **Building Relationships with Community Cultural Brokers:** Partnering with community organizations or individuals who can act as cultural brokers to help bridge cultural gaps.
- **Cultural Humility:** Approaching each interaction with humility and a willingness to learn about the student's culture and experiences.

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VI. The Nurse Administrator's Role within MTSS

Leadership and Advocacy for MTSS Implementation

Nurse administrators play a vital role in advocating for full and effective MTSS implementation, including:

- Ensuring that all staff are trained in MTSS principles and practices.
- Advocating for adequate resources to support all three tiers of MTSS.
- Promoting a school-wide culture of prevention and early intervention.

Resource Allocation and Staff Training:

- Advocating for adequate staffing, including school nurses, counselors, social workers, and other support staff.
- Securing funding for professional development on topics such as trauma-informed care, cultural competency, and working with immigrant and refugee populations.
- Providing ongoing supervision and support to school nurses.

Data-Driven Decision Making and MTSS Evaluation:

- Implementing systems for collecting and analyzing data on attendance, behavior, and academic performance.
- Using data to monitor the effectiveness of MTSS interventions and make adjustments as needed.
- Tracking outcomes for different student groups, including immigrant and refugee students, to ensure equitable access to support.

VII. Recommendations

Providing compassionate, ethical, and culturally competent care to unauthorized immigrants in the U.S. within the framework of federal regulations presents a complex challenge. Here's a breakdown of the key considerations:

Compassionate Care

- **Human Dignity:** At its core, compassionate care means recognizing the inherent dignity and worth of every individual, regardless of their immigration status. This involves treating patients with respect, empathy, and understanding, acknowledging their unique experiences and vulnerabilities.
- **Addressing Fears and Concerns:** Unauthorized immigrants often face significant fears and anxieties related to deportation, family separation, and discrimination. Compassionate care requires healthcare providers to acknowledge these concerns and create a safe and trusting environment where patients feel comfortable seeking care.
- **Meeting Basic Needs:** Many unauthorized immigrants face significant barriers to accessing basic necessities like food, housing, and transportation. Compassionate care involves addressing these social determinants of health and connecting patients with available resources and support services.

Ethics of Care

- **Beneficence and Non-maleficence:** The ethical principles of beneficence (acting in the best interests of the patient) and non-maleficence (avoiding harm) are paramount. This means

providing necessary medical care regardless of immigration status, while also being mindful of the potential risks and consequences for patients.

- **Justice and Equity:** The ethics of care also emphasizes justice and equity, ensuring that all individuals have access to healthcare regardless of their ability to pay or their immigration status. This requires addressing systemic barriers and advocating for policies that promote health equity.
- **Confidentiality:** Maintaining patient confidentiality is crucial, especially for unauthorized immigrants who may fear that their information could be shared with immigration authorities. Healthcare providers must adhere to strict confidentiality protocols and ensure that patients understand their rights.

Cultural Competence and Responsiveness

- **Understanding Cultural Differences:** Cultural competence involves understanding and respecting the cultural beliefs, values, and practices of diverse patient populations. This includes being aware of how cultural factors may influence health beliefs, communication styles, and help-seeking behaviors.
- **Language Access:** Providing language access services, such as professional interpreters, is essential for effective communication and patient safety. This ensures that patients can understand their medical conditions, treatment options, and instructions for care.
- **Culturally Tailored Interventions:** Developing culturally tailored interventions that are sensitive to the specific needs and preferences of different cultural groups. This may involve incorporating traditional healing practices or working with cultural brokers.

Federal Regulations

- **Emergency Medical Treatment and Labor Act (EMTALA):** EMTALA requires hospitals with emergency departments to provide stabilizing treatment to all individuals regardless of their immigration status or ability to pay. This ensures that unauthorized immigrants can receive emergency medical care.
- **Limited Access to Public Benefits:** Unauthorized immigrants are generally not eligible for federal healthcare programs like Medicaid and Medicare, except for emergency services. This creates significant barriers to accessing affordable healthcare.
- **State and Local Policies:** State and local policies vary widely regarding access to healthcare for unauthorized immigrants. Some states provide limited state-funded benefits, while others have more restrictive policies.

Challenges and Considerations

- **Fear of Deportation:** The fear of deportation can deter unauthorized immigrants from seeking necessary medical care. Healthcare providers must build trust and assure patients that their information will be kept confidential.
- **Financial Barriers:** The lack of insurance coverage and limited access to public benefits create significant financial barriers to healthcare. Many unauthorized immigrants rely on community health centers and free clinics for care.
- **Language and Cultural Barriers:** Language and cultural differences can make it difficult for unauthorized immigrants to navigate the healthcare system and access appropriate care.
- **Lack of Data:** Limited data on the health needs and healthcare utilization of unauthorized immigrants makes it challenging to develop effective policies and interventions.

Moving Forward
- **Advocacy for Policy Change:** Advocating for policies that expand access to affordable healthcare for all individuals regardless of immigration status.
- **Strengthening Community-Based Services:** Supporting community health centers and other organizations that provide healthcare to underserved populations, including unauthorized immigrants.
- **Promoting Cultural Competence Training:** Providing cultural competence training for healthcare providers to improve their ability to provide culturally sensitive care.
- **Conducting Research:** Conducting research to better understand the health needs and healthcare utilization of unauthorized immigrants.

VIII. Conclusion

Key Takeaways

A comprehensive, multi-tiered approach is essential for addressing chronic absenteeism, especially in vulnerable student populations. Addressing trauma, poverty, and racism, and providing culturally competent care are essential. Robust and tailored Tier 3 supports, including strong community partnerships, are critical for complex cases, particularly those involving unauthorized immigrant students.

Strong Call to Action

As school nurses, you are key leaders in ensuring the well-being of all students. I urge you to champion the full and effective implementation of MTSS in your schools. This means advocating tirelessly for the necessary resources across all tiers, especially for the intensive supports at Tier 3 that are crucial for our most vulnerable students. Prioritize the unique needs of students experiencing trauma, poverty, racism, and the specific challenges faced by immigrant and refugee populations, particularly those who are unauthorized. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, actively build and nurture strong partnerships with community organizations to create a comprehensive network of support. Taking these actions will allow nurse leaders and nurses to make a profound difference in the lives of these students and create more equitable and supportive school communities.