



Long COVID for Public Schools

CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM BEFORE
AND AFTER THE PANDEMIC

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A M E R I C A N E N T E R P R I S E I N S T I T U T E

Executive Summary

This report documents chronic absenteeism over the COVID-19 pandemic. Drawing on the American Enterprise Institute’s Return to Learn Tracker Chronic Absenteeism Data Collection, the most comprehensive and current data collection on pandemic and post-pandemic chronic absenteeism, I show that pandemic increases in chronic absenteeism were widespread during the pandemic. More worrisome, using the most recent data for the 2022–23 school year, I show that even after the pandemic subsided drastically, the elevated rates of chronic absenteeism fell very little.

I find that the national average chronic absenteeism rate increased from 15 percent in 2019 to 28 percent in 2022 and remained substantially

elevated in 2023. I also use district-level data to report variable rates of chronic absenteeism by district characteristics including pre-pandemic achievement, poverty, size, and the duration of remote instruction in the 2021 school year. Of particular concern, the percentage-point increases in chronic absenteeism were larger in districts and among groups that already had higher chronic absenteeism rates before the pandemic.

Given the potential for these rates of chronic absenteeism to hamper urgently needed recovery from pandemic learning loss and its negative association with school culture, chronic absenteeism is likely public schools’ greatest post-pandemic challenge.

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Nat Malkus

The tumult of the COVID-19 pandemic made one thing about education excruciatingly clear: Consistently showing up to school is good for students. During the pandemic, extended closures and remote learning kept millions of students out of school for unprecedented periods of time, causing significant problems for students and schools. The academic consequences of these disruptions are glaringly evident in students' test scores,¹ the social and emotional fallout is reflected in numerous indicators,² and the behavioral challenges seen following the return to in-person schooling have made life difficult on students, teachers, and entire school communities.³ Indeed, as pronouncements from policymakers,⁴ headlines on op-ed pages,⁵ and school district press releases have all suggested,⁶ if we are to catch students up from pandemic learning loss, we have to do more than just return to the status quo.

Unfortunately, consistent school attendance was a problem even before the pandemic struck. In 2018 and 2019, chronic absenteeism, measured as the percentage of students who miss 10 percent or more of a school year, affected about 15 percent of K–12 public school students. Well before the pandemic, attuned observers and the US Department of Education alike characterized chronic absenteeism as a “crisis.”⁷

The pandemic may have changed the terms of what qualifies as a crisis in education, but current chronic absenteeism levels would constitute a crisis under any terms. During the 2021–22 school year, 28 percent of students were chronically absent, an increase of roughly 89 percent over pre-pandemic

rates.⁸ The available data from the 2022–23 school year, arguably the first post-pandemic school year, show those rates are falling, but not nearly fast enough.

This report documents chronic absenteeism across the pandemic. It shows that pandemic increases in chronic absenteeism were widespread and that they were larger in more-disadvantaged districts and districts that had higher rates of chronic absenteeism before the pandemic—meaning that in many districts, current rates of chronic absenteeism are truly alarming. All told, the data suggest that chronic absenteeism is shaping up to be education's long COVID and that any hope of academic recovery will require getting students to attend school consistently.

This report draws on data from the American Enterprise Institute's Return to Learn Tracker (R2L), which I created at the beginning of the pandemic to collect weekly data on the remote-learning status of 8,600 school districts that collectively educated 89 percent of public school students. Unfortunately, nearly four years after the start of the pandemic, chronic absenteeism rates indicate that the “Return to Learn” name is still apt: Even though nearly every school returned to in-person instruction over two years ago, many students have not fully returned to school in earnest.

R2L has the most up-to-date national data on chronic absenteeism available anywhere. Where available, I collected district-level data on chronic absenteeism from state education agencies for the 2016–17 through 2022–23 school years.

As of January 2024, data on the 2022–23 school year was limited to 38 states and Washington, DC. While some states make district chronic absenteeism data public a few months after the school year ends (e.g., Indiana and Rhode Island), others release data 10 or more months after the school year ends.⁹ In other words, waiting to publish this report until all states release data would mean publishing this report many months into 2024. But that would be unwise: Available chronic absenteeism rates for the 2022–23 school year make clear that we do not have time to wait until we have complete data. If we want to address it with eyes wide open, chronic absenteeism needs to be studied in real time.

The remainder of this report consists of six sections. In the first section, I review the basic findings on chronic absenteeism. In the second section, I give an overview of the data used in this report. Next, in the third section, I review how chronic absenteeism rates changed throughout the pandemic at the state level. In the fourth section, I examine district characteristics that are associated with changes in chronic absenteeism during and after the pandemic. The fifth section overviews chronic absenteeism gaps by student race. In the final section, I discuss these results and suggest policy responses.

Chronic Absenteeism Before the Pandemic

According to the standard definition, a student is considered chronically absent if he or she misses 10 percent or more of a school year, typically 18 days out of a 180-day school year.¹⁰ Before the 2015 Every Student Succeeds Act, most states did not collect data on chronic absenteeism and instead reported only average daily attendance.¹¹ Average daily attendance measures, however, are not necessarily reflective of chronic absenteeism numbers; for example, “it is possible for a school to have 90 percent average daily attendance and still have as many as 40 percent of its students chronically absent because on different days different students are in school.”¹² After 2015, though, “the vast majority of U.S. states” began reporting on

chronic absenteeism as one “nontraditional measure of student progress.”¹³

Even pre-COVID, the data on chronic absenteeism were troubling: One 2012 study estimated that, each year, between 5 and 7.5 million of the roughly 50 million US students in pre-K–12 schools were chronically absent.¹⁴ Several analyses noted that low-income students, minority students, and students with disabilities were more likely to be chronically absent than were wealthier, white, or nondisabled students.¹⁵

Moreover, chronic absenteeism is associated with lower standardized test scores.¹⁶ Emma García and Elaine Weiss found that eighth graders who missed three or more days of school in the month before being tested scored between 0.3 and 0.6 standard deviations lower on the 2015 National Assessment of Educational Progress math test, depending on the number of days missed, than did those who did not miss any school days.¹⁷ Studies have shown larger associations between chronic absenteeism and achievement in later grades than in earlier grades and in math than in reading.¹⁸ Studies have also shown that chronic absenteeism is negatively associated with social emotional measures, again with stronger effects in later grades and particularly in middle school.¹⁹ In some contexts, chronic absenteeism is also strongly predictive of course failure and high school non-completion.²⁰

There is also evidence that when students are chronically absent, their non-chronically absent peers suffer as well. Michael A. Gottfried found that chronically absent students may cause lower achievement in reading and math among their peers.²¹ Gottfried suggested that chronically absent students are more likely to have academic and behavioral problems when they return to school, forcing teachers to spend more time addressing their needs at the expense of other students’ needs.

Several studies have also noted that students who were chronically absent in earlier grades were more likely to continue to be chronically absent in later grades.²²

Pre-pandemic, certain school interventions have proven capable of reducing absenteeism. These include low-cost interventions such as communication

efforts²³ and more expensive interventions such as transportation services and mentoring supports.²⁴ In general, lower-cost interventions prove to have cost-effective but relatively small impacts on chronic absenteeism, while more resource-intensive interventions can generate larger improvements. This pattern meshes with other research that suggests that broader efforts, in addition to narrow individual and school interventions, may be required to substantially improve chronic absenteeism.²⁵ Whether and how much these interventions might influence the much higher pandemic-era rates of chronic absenteeism remains an open question.

Methods

State-sourced data, which are both comparable over time and the most up-to-date large-scale data on chronic absenteeism, serve as the primary data in R2L's chronic absenteeism tracker. I collected district-level chronic absenteeism data from each state, as available, for the 2016–17 through 2022–23 school years. (Henceforth, school years are referred to by the spring year—for example, as the 2017 school year instead of the 2016–17 school year.) To obtain rates, I collected the numerators (i.e., the number of students who were chronically absent) and denominators (i.e., the total number of students eligible for inclusion in chronic absentee counts) for each district.²⁶

Some states posted these data only in select years. As shown in Table A1, R2L includes state-sourced data for 21 states in 2017, 39 in 2018, and 43 in 2019. Thirty-three states provided data for 2020, and 43 states and Washington, DC, did for 2021; however, remote instruction interfered with both attendance itself and traditional attendance-collection data systems, making the quality and comparability of chronic absenteeism rates in the 2020 and 2021 school years somewhat questionable. For 2022, R2L has state-sourced district-level data for 45 states and Washington, DC.

Data from 2023 are still being reported, but at the time of publication, R2L includes state-sourced

2023 district-level data for 38 states and Washington, DC. Data for additional states will be added to the R2L chronic absenteeism collection as they become available.²⁷

I supplement missing state-sourced data with recently released district-level chronic absenteeism counts from the US Department of Education's *EDFacts* data collection published through its ED Data Express platform.²⁸ These data include counts of students chronically absent at the local education agency (LEA) level for 2018 and 2019 and at the school and LEA level by student race for 2020 through 2022. The ED Data Express counts are the best available numerators for calculating chronic absenteeism rates but unfortunately do not include matching denominators. Therefore, after consulting with National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) staff, I merged the ED Data Express count data with NCES Common Core of Data (CCD) K–12 student membership counts, which are the best available denominators for calculating chronic absenteeism rates.

Note that *these denominators are imperfect*. At the direction of NCES, the *EDFacts* chronic absenteeism counts include the number of all students enrolled in a site for at least 10 days who were absent for any reason for 10 percent or more of their enrollment. In contrast, most states use denominators for their chronic absenteeism rates that include only students who were enrolled for a longer period of time, typically either at least a semester or 100 days in the school year. In other words, the *EDFacts* counts for chronic absenteeism are drawn from a different, and typically larger, pool of students than CCD enrollment counts are drawn from.

If all students at a site were enrolled for the entire year, the two denominators would produce similar rates. However, since many schools and districts only count students who are enrolled for a longer period of time, they will frequently have a smaller student count in their enrollment data.²⁹ Consequently, the resulting rates lead to a potential upward bias in the *EDFacts* rates, and, though relatively small, that bias is likely to be higher in schools with higher intra-year student mobility.

As such, I use estimates based on the ED Data Express collection for 2018 through 2022 only for districts where no state-sourced data are available. The proportion of R2L data taken from ED Data Express rather than state-sourced data are shown in Table A1 and represent only a small share of districts in 2022 and relatively larger shares in 2018 and 2019. In most years, the vast majority of data were drawn from state-sourced data. The differences in average rates based on state-sourced data and the ED Data Express data are small but non-negligible at the state level. I also remove all rates that exceed 100 percent.

I use several other data sources to compare rates of chronic absenteeism across types of districts. LEA location data come from CCD's Education Demographic and Geographic Estimates (EDGE) data files. Urbanicity, school district size, and minority percentage figures also come from CCD data. Poverty estimates for districts use Small Area Income and Poverty Estimates data from 2022. Duration of in-person instruction in the 2021 school year and duration of masking requirements in the 2022 school year for about 8,500 districts come from R2L. Data on historical achievement come from the Stanford Education Data Archive data for 2019.³⁰ Data on the prevalence of single-parent households come from American Community Survey 2020 county-level estimates, which were translated to district measures using EDGE School District Geographic Relationship Files.³¹

All estimates in this report are student weighted and represent the percentage of students attending districts with a given rate of chronic absenteeism. Unweighted estimates would treat districts with equal weight, giving a district with 200 students the same weight as a district with 200,000 students. As such, percentages reflect the percentage of students attending districts with a given average rate of chronic absenteeism rather than the average of district rates.

Findings

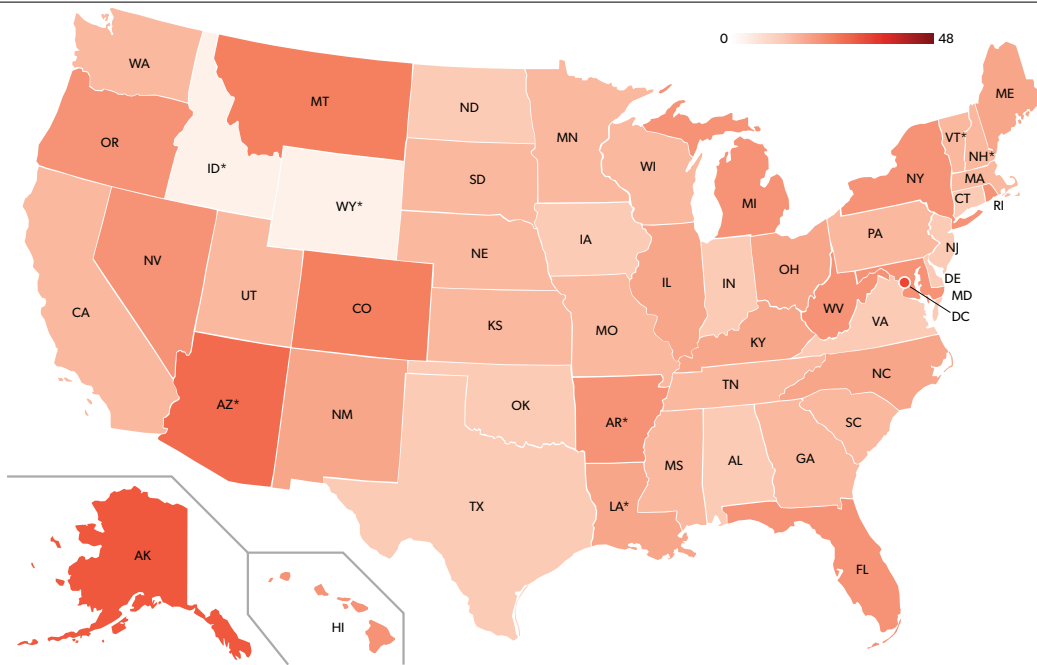
Chronic absenteeism was a serious issue before the pandemic, with meaningful variation across states (Figure 1). In 2019, Alaska, at 28 percent, was the state with the highest rate of chronic absenteeism, and only three states had average rates of 10 percent or less.³² (See Table A2.) The average chronic absenteeism rate across the nation was 15 percent, and the range across districts was rather limited. In 2019, the middle 50 percent of students attended districts with chronic absenteeism rates between 9.4 and 18.8 percent, and the middle 80 percent of students attended districts with chronic absenteeism rates between 6.4 and 25.1 percent.

Figure 2 shows parallel data for 2022 and reflects the dramatic pandemic increase in chronic absenteeism. In 2022, Arizona, at 48 percent, had the highest rate of chronic absenteeism, and Alabama, at 18 percent, had the lowest rate of chronic absenteeism (Table A2). In 2022, the national average rate was 28 percent, an increase of 89 percent over 2019 rates. The range across districts also grew by 2022, when the middle 50 percent of students attended districts with chronic absenteeism rates between 19.3 and 36.8 percent. This 2022 interquartile range is remarkable not only because it is larger than the 2019 mean but because the 25th percentile in 2022 was far above the average chronic absenteeism in 2019. The range for the chronic absenteeism rates for the middle 80 percent of students also grew for 2022, ranging from 13.3 to 43.7 percent.

Figure 3 displays 2023 data for the 39 states with data for 2023, arguably the first truly post-pandemic school year. In 33 of 39 states, chronic absenteeism was lower in 2023 than in 2022; however, the differences were relatively small. The average chronic absenteeism rate across these states in 2023 was 26 percent, down from 28 percent for the same 39 states in 2022. (See Table A3.)

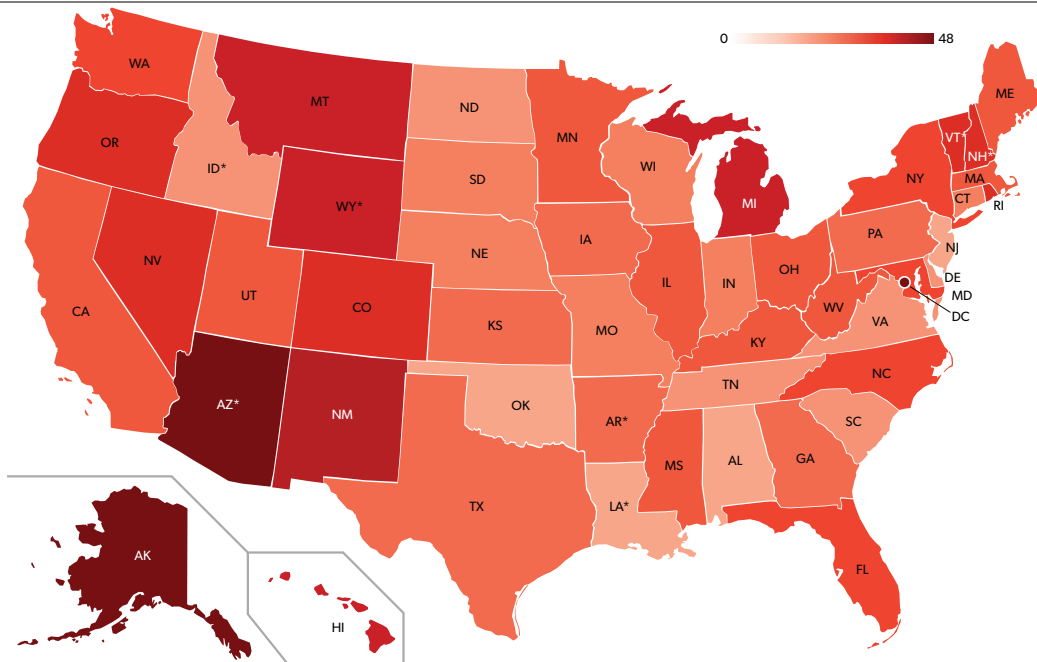
It is difficult to communicate the magnitude of the change in chronic absenteeism rates during the pandemic, but using pre-pandemic chronic absenteeism percentiles for districts to measure states' post-pandemic averages is suggestive. Table 1

Figure 1. State Average Chronic Absenteeism: 2019



Note: *Estimates are based on data from Ed.gov.
 Source: Return to Learn Tracker, “Chronic Absenteeism: 2017–2023,” American Enterprise Institute, January 2024, <https://www.returntolearntacker.net>.

Figure 2. State Average Chronic Absenteeism: 2022



Note: *Estimates are based on data from Ed.gov.
 Source: Return to Learn Tracker, “Chronic Absenteeism: 2017–2023,” American Enterprise Institute, January 2024, <https://www.returntolearntacker.net>.

Table 1. Post-Pandemic Chronic Absenteeism in Terms of 2019 Percentiles, by State: 2022 and 2023

State	Percentile in 2019		State	Percentile in 2019		State	Percentile in 2019	
	2022	2023		2022	2023		2022	2023
US	96	94						
AK	93	92	LA	72	92	NY	94	—
AL	94	94	MA	99	90	OH	87	83
AR	83	—	MD	91	91	OK	89	91
AZ	95	—	ME	99	98	OR	99	99
CA	98	97	MI	90	85	PA	87	—
CO	88	83	MN	97	—	RI	78	78
CT	94	93	MO	95	92	SC	99	100
DE	92	90	MS	100	99	SD	84	84
FL	99	98	MT	91	—	TN	97	—
GA	99	99	NC	99	98	TX	98	—
IA	100	98	ND	89	90	UT	98	95
ID	100	100	NE	81	80	VA	98	98
IL	91	91	NH	100	—	VT	99	—
IN	92	90	NJ	88	—	WA	99	99
KS	94	91	NM	99	98	WI	87	—
KY	94	95	NV	93*	93*	WV	88	88

Note: *Nevada had no 2019 data, so its percentiles are based on 2018.

Source: Return to Learn Tracker, “Chronic Absenteeism: 2017–2023,” American Enterprise Institute, January 2024, <https://www.returntolearntracker.net>.

displays states’ average chronic absenteeism rates in 2022 and 2023 as the student-weighted percentile from 2019. In simpler terms, the columns show where the state average post-pandemic would rank in the 2019 distribution of chronic absenteeism for the same state. For example, Table 1 shows that if an Alaska school district’s 2019 chronic absenteeism rate were the same as Alaska’s average chronic absenteeism rate in 2022, that district would have ranked in the 93rd percentile of most chronically absent districts in Alaska in 2019.

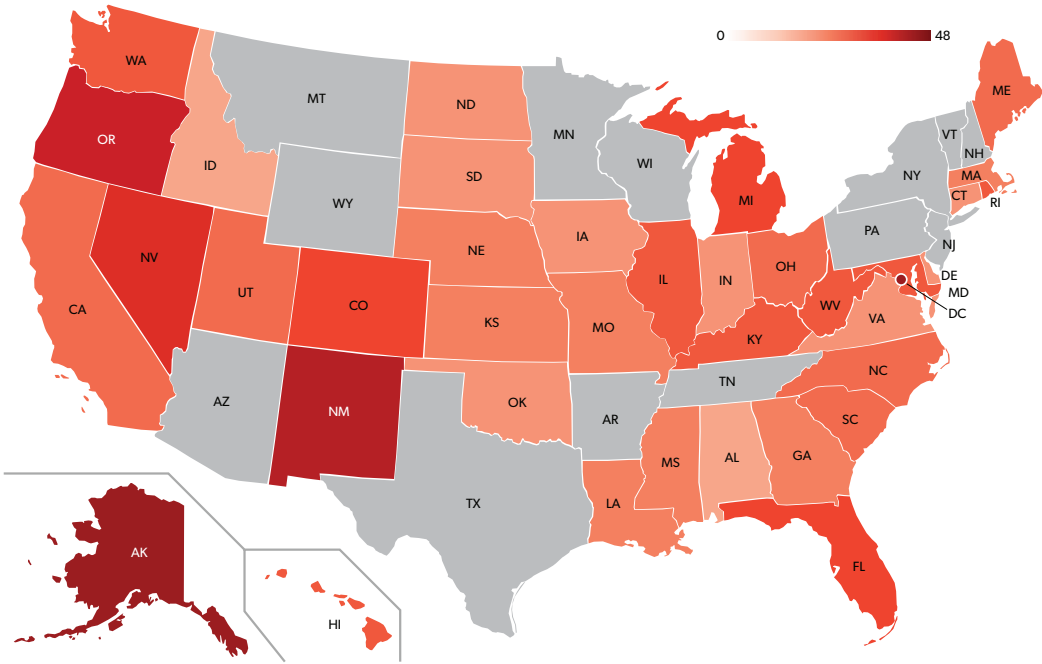
Table 1 also shows how the nation as a whole performed in 2022 and 2023. If a school district’s chronic absenteeism rate in 2019 were the same as the national average chronic absenteeism rate in 2022, that district would have ranked in the 96th percentile of most chronically absent districts in the nation.

Similarly, if a school district’s chronic absenteeism rate in 2019 were the same as the average 2023 rate for the 39 states with 2023 data, that district would have ranked in the 94th percentile of most chronically absent districts in the nation.

Looking at these comparisons shows that all states have experienced large increases in chronic absenteeism. Indeed, in 2022 and 2023, the average chronic absenteeism rate in Rhode Island, the state that performed best in 2022 and 2023 relative to its pre-pandemic performance, was the same as Rhode Island’s 78th percentile district rate for 2019.³³ These figures demonstrate both the enormous change in chronic absenteeism and how modest the declines in chronic absenteeism between 2022 and 2023 were.

While the dramatic increase in chronic absenteeism between 2019 and 2022 is perhaps more

Figure 3. State Average Chronic Absenteeism: 2023



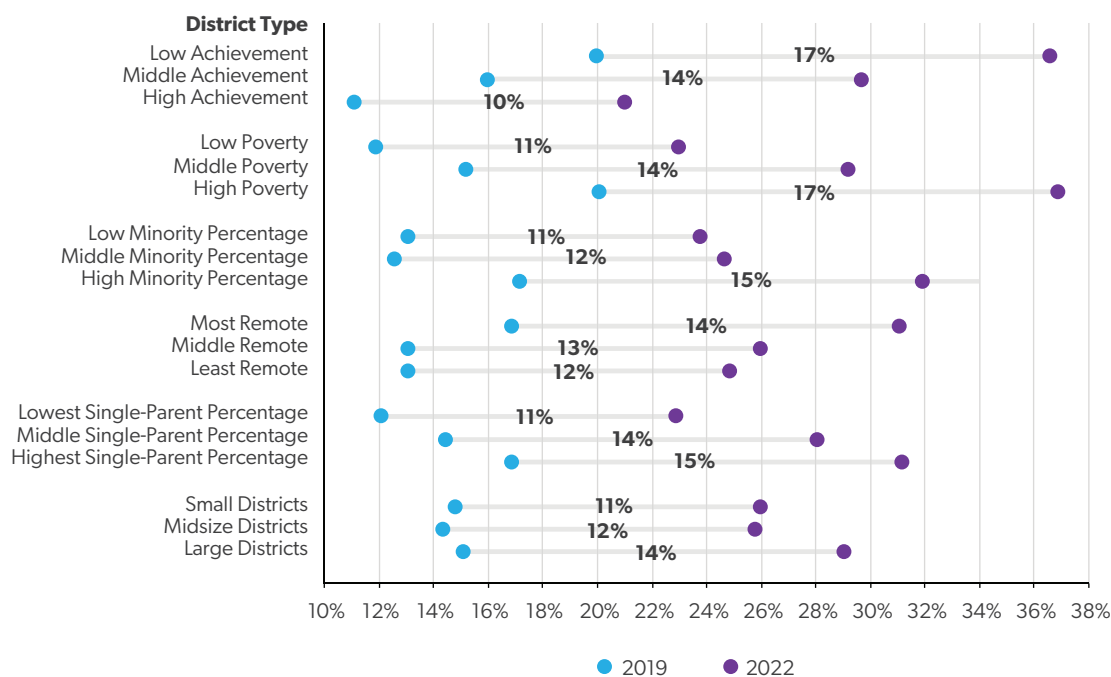
Source: Return to Learn Tracker, “Chronic Absenteeism: 2017–2023,” American Enterprise Institute, January 2024, <https://www.returntolearntacker.net>.

startling, the most important data displayed here are the partial data from 2023. The 2023 data aren’t more important simply because they are more recent but because they show the severity of chronic absenteeism *after* the pandemic. The 2022 high mark in chronic absenteeism came during a school year marked by the omicron strain of COVID-19, which caused substantial peaks in COVID cases and, presumably, absenteeism related to those COVID cases. In 2022, when students largely attended school in person yet COVID cases were very high, high absenteeism may actually have been good. However, 2023 was a very different year, with a much lower COVID threat but only modest improvements in chronic absenteeism. This suggests that chronic absenteeism during 2023 was not primarily driven by COVID infections. For this reason, the still very high chronic absenteeism rates from 2023 are an ominous omen for schools.

What Kinds of Districts Struggle the Most?

With district-level data from across the county, I next describe what district characteristics are associated with higher rates of chronic absenteeism. The overall pattern is simple: Increases in chronic absenteeism were widespread, with 97 percent of students in 2022 attending a school district whose chronic absenteeism rate was higher than it was in 2019. However, the percentage-point increases were larger in districts that already had higher chronic absenteeism rates in 2019.

In the remainder of this section and the following one, I consider how chronic absenteeism varied by a number of characteristics: historical district achievement, district poverty, urbanicity, and more. For all the characteristics I consider, I divide districts by terciles weighted by student membership. For instance, when I examine chronic absenteeism rates by poverty levels, I look at chronic absenteeism rates for the third of districts with lower poverty levels, the third

Figure 4. Change in Chronic Absenteeism Rate by District Type: 2019 to 2022

Note: The figure only includes student-weighted rates for districts with data for both 2019 and 2022.

Source: Return to Learn Tracker, “Chronic Absenteeism: 2017–2023,” American Enterprise Institute, January 2024, <https://www.returntolearntacker.net>.

of districts with higher poverty levels, and the third of districts in the middle. *Each of these groups is quite large*: Higher-poverty districts, for example, include roughly one-third of American K–12 students, not just students in districts where the average family lives well below the poverty line.

As such, it is reasonable to assume that chronic absenteeism can vary not just *by* tercile but also *within* terciles. For example, since chronic absenteeism rates were substantially higher in the lower-achieving third of districts, it is not unreasonable to assume that chronic absenteeism rates might have been even higher in the lowest-achieving tenth of districts. In other words, although the chronic absenteeism rates shown below are conspicuous, the trends discussed below suggest that chronic absenteeism rates are even more conspicuous for large numbers of students.

Increases in chronic absenteeism were most glaring in districts with low pre-pandemic academic achievement. (See Figure 4.) In the third of districts

with the lowest achievement, chronic absenteeism jumped 17 percentage points, from 20 to 37 percent, between 2019 and 2022. Meanwhile, in the third of districts with the highest achievement, rates doubled during the same period, increasing 10 points, from 11 to 21 percent.

Increases by poverty were similar, with rates in high-poverty districts increasing from 20 to 37 percent, while rates in low-poverty districts increased from 12 to 23 percent. The pattern was less stark by the percentage of non-white students: Chronic absenteeism rose by 15 points, from 17 to 32 percent, in high-minority districts but by less in middle- and low-minority districts—from 12 to 25 percent and from 13 to 24 percent, respectively.

There are smaller but still substantial differences by other measures, such as the duration of remote instruction during 2021, the first full pandemic school year. The third of districts in the R2L instructional status dataset that were least remote

and those in the middle third saw similar increases between 2018 and 2022, while the third of districts that were most remote saw slightly larger increases: Chronic absenteeism rates in the least remote districts increased 12 points, from 13 to 25 percent; rates in the middle third of districts increased 13 points, from 13 to 26 percent; and chronic absenteeism rates in the most remote districts increased 14 points, from 17 to 31 percent. Note that these raw differences may or may not be due to the duration of remote instruction, as the duration of remote instruction was longer in districts that had lower achievement, higher poverty, and other characteristics that might explain part or all of these gaps.

Increases in chronic absenteeism were relatively weakly related to district size and county-level percentage of single-parent households. Chronic absenteeism rates in the third of districts with the highest percentage of single-parent households increased 15 points, from 17 to 31 percent, while rates in the middle third of districts increased by 14 points, from 14 to 28 percent, and rates in the lowest third of districts increased by 11 points, from 12 to 23 percent. Additionally, there were no real differences between small and midsized districts, which both had chronic absenteeism rates that increased roughly 12 points, from 14 to 26 percent; however, chronic absenteeism rates in large districts increased somewhat more, from 15 to 29 percent, or by 14 points.

As shown on the R2L website, these patterns tend to be similar within states, but these patterns do not hold for all states. The R2L website also shows the same patterns of change not only from 2018 to 2022 but also from 2018 to 2023.³⁴ By and large, declines in chronic absenteeism rates in 2023 were slightly larger for the types of districts that had the largest increases between 2018 and 2022, but these differences are relatively small.

There are three broad and sobering conclusions that can be drawn from these comparisons. First, the spike in chronic absenteeism is both severe and widespread, with no district type spared an increase of fewer than 10 points, or a proportional increase of 75 percent. Second, it does not appear that COVID infections can fully explain these increases in chronic

absenteeism. COVID infections certainly explain some of the increase in chronic absenteeism rates, especially in 2022, but they do not explain the variation seen across district types nor the elevated rates seen in 2023. And third, chronic absenteeism has increased the most for disadvantaged students, those who also experienced the greatest learning losses during the pandemic and can least afford the harms that come with chronic absenteeism.³⁵

Chronic Absenteeism by Race

The previous section described how chronic absenteeism differed by district characteristics, but now I turn to examine how it varied across student characteristics. The *EDFacts* data provide chronic absenteeism counts for each district and school by student race for 2020, 2021, and 2022. I aggregate these numbers to estimate chronic absenteeism rates for white, black, and Hispanic students using counts from CCD files. *EDFacts* data by student race are available beginning in 2020, and Table 2 compares chronic absenteeism rates overall and for each race group.

These data should be interpreted with caution for two reasons. First, the 2020 data come from the 2019–20 school year, which was interrupted by the outbreak of the pandemic and thus reflect pre-pandemic rates, albeit with some uncertainty. Second, as previously noted, the numerators from *EDFacts* and denominators from CCD are not well matched. Nonetheless, these data provide the best available look on race differences nationwide.

The changes in chronic absenteeism rates by race resemble the patterns in chronic absenteeism rates by district type: Race groups with higher pre-pandemic rates also had the highest percentage-point increases. In the 78,000 schools that have chronic absenteeism data sorted by race for both 2020 and 2022, rates increased from 7 to 15 percent among Asian students and from 11 to 24 percent among white students. Meanwhile, increases in chronic absenteeism for both black and Hispanic students were more than 20 percentage points: Among Hispanic students, chronic absenteeism increased from 16 to 36 percent, and among black

Table 2. Chronic Absenteeism by Student Race: 2020 and 2022

	2020	2022	Percentage-Point Change	Percentage Increase	N 2020 (Millions)	N 2022 (Millions)
All Students	14%	29%	15.5	114%	41.8	41.7
Asian	7%	16%	8.2	112%	1.8	1.8
Black	19%	39%	20.7	112%	6.7	6.5
Hispanic	15%	36%	21.1	139%	10.2	10.1
White	11%	24%	12.8	114%	20.9	19.7

Note: Data come from 78,000 schools with data in both 2020 and 2022.

Source: Author's calculations using Ed Data Express, Chronically Absent Students School Data, 2019–20 and 2021–22; and National Center for Education Statistics, Common Core of Data, Public Elementary/Secondary School Universe Survey Data, version 1a, <https://nces.ed.gov/ccd/pubschuniv.asp>.

students, chronic absenteeism increased from 18 to 39 percent.

These averages by race also differ across district types. Table 3 displays changes between 2020 and 2022 for Asian, black, Hispanic, and white students by district terciles of poverty, pre-pandemic achievement,³⁶ urbanicity, and remote instructional status during the 2021 school year. Changes in chronic absenteeism by district characteristic affected each race group similarly, with larger percentage-point increases for districts that had higher rates of chronic absenteeism pre-pandemic—that is, for high-poverty, lower-historic-achievement, and urban districts and for districts that offered extended remote instruction in 2021.

With rates near or above 40 percent, chronic absenteeism in 2022 was greatest for black and Hispanic students in the highest-poverty and lowest-achievement terciles. However, middle-poverty and middle-achievement terciles also saw substantial gains in chronic absenteeism, leading to 2022 rates that were similar to rates in the highest-poverty and lowest-achievement terciles and much higher than the rates in the lowest-poverty and highest-achievement terciles. The pattern for Asian and white students is somewhat similar, though less consistent and with smaller absolute differences. In general, chronic absenteeism rates in 2022 show a demarcation by poverty and achievement that separates the

more advantaged terciles from the middle and less advantaged ones.

Because black and Hispanic students are not evenly distributed across terciles, these patterns are even worse for black and Hispanic students than Table 3 suggests. Table A5 shows that the low-poverty and high-achievement terciles—which are defined based on the entire population of students—include relatively smaller shares of black and Hispanic students. For example, 54 percent of black students go to school in low-achievement districts, while just 22 percent of white students do.

Suburban and rural rates of chronic absenteeism within a race group were similar for Asian, black, and Hispanic students in 2022, but urban rates were much higher for all three groups of students. For example, in 2022 the chronic absenteeism rate for Asian students was 13 percent in both suburban and rural districts but 20 percent in urban districts.

Differences in chronic absenteeism rates by 2021 remote instructional status also show markedly different rates for Asian, black, and Hispanic students. In the most remote districts, chronic absenteeism rates were markedly higher for Asian, black, and Hispanic students than they were in the least remote and middle third of districts, though a similar pattern of smaller differences existed before the pandemic. For white students, there were relatively small differences by urbanicity and remote instructional status.

Table 3. Chronic Absenteeism by Student Race and District Type: 2020 and 2022

Poverty	2020			2022		
	Low	Middle	High	Low	Middle	High
Asian	7%	6%	9%	13%	16%	19%
Black	16%	18%	19%	32%	40%	41%
Hispanic	16%	15%	15%	32%	38%	38%
White	10%	11%	13%	20%	25%	27%
Achievement	Low	Middle	High	Low	Middle	High
Asian	9%	9%	6%	21%	20%	11%
Black	20%	18%	12%	43%	38%	27%
Hispanic	16%	16%	13%	40%	37%	29%
White	16%	12%	8%	31%	26%	19%
District Urbanicity	Urban	Suburban	Town or Rural	Urban	Suburban	Town or Rural
Asian	10%	6%	6%	20%	13%	13%
Black	23%	16%	12%	46%	34%	32%
Hispanic	17%	14%	12%	41%	34%	32%
White	13%	10%	12%	26%	21%	25%
2021 Instruction	Most Remote	Middle	Least Remote	Most Remote	Middle	Least Remote
Asian	9%	7%	4%	18%	13%	13%
Black	21%	17%	15%	44%	36%	34%
Hispanic	19%	14%	12%	41%	34%	32%
White	13%	11%	10%	25%	23%	24%

Note: The table excludes California entirely due to missing 2020 data, and it excludes districts with missing achievement data from Stanford Education Data Archive data and 2021 instructional data from AEI's Return to Learn instructional tracker. Sample sizes are shown in Table A5.

Source: Author's calculations using Ed Data Express, Chronically Absent Students School Data, 2019–20 and 2021–22; and National Center for Education Statistics, Common Core of Data, Public Elementary/Secondary School Universe Survey Data, version 1a, <https://nces.ed.gov/ccd/pubschuniv.asp>.

These data make clear that chronic absenteeism has dramatically increased for all students. They also make clear that the chronic absenteeism crisis is dramatically more severe for black and Hispanic students, for students in historically disadvantaged districts, and even more so for black and Hispanic students in historically disadvantaged districts. While these data come from 2022, the apex of pandemic chronic absenteeism, the limited improvements we have seen in the available data from 2023 suggest these patterns are durable. The question now is what

students and parents, teachers and principals, and district, state, and federal leaders will do to help students attend school more consistently again.

Discussion

While it may seem premature to publish a report on chronic absenteeism in January 2024, when data for many states are still outstanding, the urgent need to address this problem during the 2024 school year

outweighs the upside of waiting for more complete data. The reason the 2023 data are so important is simple. While complete 2022 data showing chronic absenteeism rates are important in their own right—especially given the alarming differentials described above—they show rates during the pandemic. Indeed, elevated chronic absenteeism rates in 2022, when the pandemic was at its omicron height, were concerning but perhaps warranted, and one could have reasonably hoped that they would not be predictive of post-pandemic trends.

Unfortunately, the 2023 data clearly show that such hopes would have been unfounded. While chronic absenteeism did decline in 33 of the 39 states with available 2023 data, those declines are far too small. Even if rates were to fall at the same pace for the foreseeable future, public schools would not return to pre-pandemic rates—rates that were already problematic—until roughly 2030.

But even then, there is no obvious rationale for supposing that chronic absenteeism would fall at such a rate instead of remaining at or near current levels. Indeed, there were strong reasons to expect chronic absenteeism rates to fall between 2022, when COVID case rates were high, and 2023, the first post-pandemic school year, but what strong reasons are there to suppose that chronic absenteeism will fall at a similar rate between 2023 and 2024 or between 2028 and 2029? Why not suppose instead that 2023 chronic absenteeism rates are the new post-pandemic baseline? In short, surging chronic absenteeism is not a pandemic problem but a post-pandemic problem, one that educators will need to grapple with in the coming years.

Chronic absenteeism harms students even in normal times, but it is even worse in the context of pandemic learning loss because it will hamper academic recovery and likely already has.³⁷ Moreover, the groups of students with the highest rates of chronic absenteeism—black and Hispanic students and those in low-achievement and high-poverty school districts—are the same students whose pandemic learning losses tend to be larger.³⁸ Chronic absenteeism is arguably the number-one problem facing public schools today, and it will likely hamper pandemic

academic recovery and further widen achievement gaps in the coming years.

A viable response to the problem of chronic absenteeism will have to match not only its scale and severity but also its nature. While the nature of pandemic learning loss requires instructional solutions—likely in terms of both instructional approaches and instructional time—post-pandemic chronic absenteeism looks more like a cultural problem. During the pandemic, altered school practices loosened established norms for school attendance, and over the past few years, students and families have grown accustomed to these new norms. The pandemic surge in chronic absenteeism may not support this cultural diagnosis, but the post-pandemic durability of that surge does.

To the extent that post-pandemic chronic absenteeism reflects a cultural problem for schools, efforts to fix the problem should target cultural change. Before the pandemic, many interventions that proved effective at reducing chronic absenteeism had small marginal effects, which, though worthwhile, are not likely sufficient for addressing the current problem schools and districts are facing. Many of the antecedents of chronic absenteeism frequently mentioned before the pandemic—including student employment, bullying, transportation, and various markers of disadvantage—remain worthwhile concerns after the pandemic, but there is no evidence these have increased to the extent that chronic absenteeism has. Addressing the current chronic absenteeism crisis with the pre-pandemic playbook does not look like a viable solution to the root problem facing schools today.

What might more plausible antecedents of post-pandemic chronic absenteeism include? Though more research is required, it seems plausible that the pandemic weakened the culture of attendance in several ways: Remote schooling and quarantines removed students from the routines of *going* to school (i.e., in a school building) and parents from the routines of making sure their children get to school, disrupted learning and lower-quality academic offerings weakened parents' and students' perceptions of the importance of school and sense of obligation regarding

school attendance, pandemic-era online instructional supports made the consequences of missing school seem less consequential, and being away from teachers and peers worsened students' sense of belonging at school. If this assessment is correct, turning the tide will require conspicuous efforts to return to pre-pandemic norms that parents, students, and schools adhered to just a few years ago.

This enormous challenge demands a response of equal magnitude. Though this report focuses on describing the problem, some observations regarding what may be part of a necessary, if not sufficient, treatment are warranted. The first is that school districts will need to use both carrots and sticks to address the problem. Surely that means adding supports targeting student belonging, transportation challenges, communication efforts, and positive reinforcements, but those inducements should be supported with expectations and appropriate consequences for both truant students and parents who prove unwilling to fulfill their moral and legal obligations to make sure their child attends school regularly. This generation of students already faces setbacks too large to be satisfied with marginal interventions, however well-intentioned.

Ameliorating this cultural challenge will be difficult without bold leadership. Leaders—from principals to the president—should use the bully pulpit to make plain that, just as the pandemic is over, pandemic-era exceptionalism in schools must also be over, meaning that school attendance must return to normal and that other unwanted behaviors must

stop. Certainly, such proclamations won't be sufficient for cultural change in schools, but they will provide the political cover and moral standing for schools to mount muscular responses to the chronic absenteeism crisis. Governors can provide cover for district superintendents and subsequently superintendents for principals to push students and families to change.

Absent from the list above are teachers, but only because they warrant their own mention. Teachers are an indispensable component of the change that must happen in schools. No combination of counselors, central office staff, emailed announcements, truancy officers, and superintendents will be able to provide the effective communication and demonstrate the concern that students' teachers can. We can empathize with beleaguered teachers who bear substantial daily burdens and have limited capacity for another responsibility and still see that their engagement is necessary for substantial cultural change in schools and the accompanying improvements in student attendance.

About the Author

Nat Malkus is a senior fellow and the deputy director of education policy at the American Enterprise Institute, where he specializes in empirical research on K-12 schooling and, since the COVID-19 pandemic struck, has tracked its various impacts on schools.

Appendix

Table A1. Percentage of R2L Chronic Absenteeism Data Drawn from ED Facts, by State: 2018–22

	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022		2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
AL	0%	0%	100%	0%	0%	ND	5%	5%	5%	5%	0%
AR	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	NE	100%	1%	0%	0%	0%
AZ	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%	NH	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
CA	0%	3%	100%	4%	4%	NJ	0%	0%	100%	0%	0%
CO	0%	0%	2%	0%	0%	NM	100%	0%	0%	0%	0%
DC	0%	100%	100%	0%	0%	NV	100%	0%	100%	0%	0%
DE	0%	0%	100%	3%	3%	NY	2%	3%	100%	4%	4%
HI	100%	0%	0%	0%	0%	OH	1%	2%	2%	1%	3%
IA	100%	100%	0%	0%	0%	OK	3%	4%	100%	100%	7%
ID	100%	100%	0%	2%	6%	OR	0%	0%	100%	0%	0%
KY	0%	0%	100%	0%	0%	SC	1%	1%	3%	0%	1%
LA	100%	100%	100%	100%	4%	SD	0%	0%	100%	0%	0%
MD	0%	0%	0%	1%	0%	TN	1%	0%	0%	0%	0%
MI	1%	1%	1%	16%	1%	TX	100%	0%	0%	0%	0%
MN	0%	0%	100%	100%	0%	VT	0%	33%	39%	38%	100%
MO	0%	1%	1%	0%	1%	WA	0%	0%	1%	0%	0%
MS	1%	1%	100%	1%	2%	WY	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%
NC	3%	4%	4%	5%	5%						

Note: No ED Facts data were available for 2017 or 2023 or used for 2018–22 in Arkansas, Connecticut, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Indiana, Kansas, Massachusetts, Maine, Montana, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, Utah, Virginia, Wisconsin, or West Virginia.

Source: Return to Learn Tracker, “Chronic Absenteeism: 2017–2023,” American Enterprise Institute, January 2024, <https://www.returntolearntacker.net>.

Table A2. Chronic Absenteeism Rates by State: 2017–23

School Year (Spring)								School Year (Spring)							
State	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	State	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
US	13%	15%	15%	13%	19%	28%	26%	MS	—	17%	14%	9%	21%	28%	24%
AK	24%	26%	28%	17%	22%	46%	43%	MT	—	21%	23%	14%	27%	38%	—
AL	18%	18%	11%	9%	8%	18%	18%	NC	—	15%	16%	9%	26%	32%	27%
AR*	—	19%	19%	23%	16%	27%	—	ND	—	11%	12%	11%	16%	21%	19%
AZ*	—	25%	25%	16%	25%	48%	—	NE	—	16%	15%	15%	21%	24%	22%
CA	11%	12%	13%	—	14%	30%	25%	NH*	—	16%	14%	13%	18%	35%	—
CO	19%	24%	23%	23%	26%	35%	31%	NJ	10%	11%	11%	8%	13%	18%	—
CT	—	11%	10%	12%	19%	24%	20%	NM	—	17%	17%	15%	30%	41%	40%
DC	—	29%	33%	29%	31%	48%	44%	NV	—	20%	19%	20%	31%	36%	35%
DE	11%	11%	11%	17%	18%	20%	20%	NY	—	18%	19%	21%	24%	32%	—
FL	—	20%	20%	17%	25%	32%	31%	OH	13%	15%	16%	10%	23%	29%	26%
GA	—	13%	13%	9%	21%	25%	23%	OK	—	13%	13%	18%	14%	19%	21%
HI	—	19%	19%	12%	18%	37%	30%	OR	20%	20%	20%	22%	28%	36%	38%
IA	—	11%	12%	17%	21%	26%	21%	PA	15%	15%	15%	15%	18%	26%	—
ID*	—	3%	3%	8%	16%	21%	18%	RI	19%	19%	19%	18%	28%	34%	29%
IL	—	17%	18%	11%	21%	30%	28%	SC	—	12%	13%	14%	8%	20%	25%
IN	10%	12%	12%	11%	20%	23%	21%	SD	—	13%	14%	11%	18%	22%	21%
KS	—	14%	14%	14%	18%	26%	23%	TN	—	13%	13%	13%	15%	20%	—
KY	—	18%	18%	12%	22%	28%	30%	TX	—	13%	11%	7%	15%	26%	—
LA*	—	16%	16%	11%	25%	18%	22%	UT	12%	13%	14%	9%	19%	29%	25%
MA	13%	13%	13%	13%	18%	28%	24%	VA	12%	11%	11%	12%	11%	20%	19%
MD	—	20%	20%	18%	24%	31%	30%	VT*	11%	12%	14%	16%	22%	35%	—
ME	16%	16%	17%	18%	21%	30%	26%	WA	15%	15%	15%	9%	19%	33%	30%
MI	16%	21%	20%	21%	20%	39%	32%	WI	12%	13%	13%	13%	16%	22%	—
MN	13%	14%	14%	15%	17%	30%	—	WV	—	19%	20%	19%	13%	29%	28%
MO	11%	12%	13%	15%	17%	24%	23%	WY*	—	2%	2%	2%	2%	37%	—

Note: * Estimates for these states are based in whole or in part on data from Ed.gov.

Source: Return to Learn Tracker, “Chronic Absenteeism: 2017–2023,” American Enterprise Institute, January 2024, <https://www.returntolearnteacher.net>.

Table A3. State Data–Sourced Chronic Absenteeism Rates by State: 2017–23

School Year (Spring)								School Year (Spring)							
State	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	State	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
US	13%	15%	15%	12%	19%	28%	26%	MS	—	17%	14%	—	21%	28%	24%
AK	24%	26%	28%	17%	22%	46%	43%	MT	—	21%	23%	14%	27%	38%	—
AL	18%	18%	11%	—	8%	18%	18%	NC	—	15%	16%	10%	27%	32%	27%
CA	11%	12%	13%	—	15%	30%	25%	ND	—	11%	12%	10%	15%	21%	19%
CO	19%	24%	23%	23%	26%	35%	31%	NE	—	—	15%	15%	21%	24%	22%
CT	—	11%	10%	12%	19%	24%	20%	NJ	10%	11%	11%	—	13%	18%	—
DC	—	29%	—	—	31%	48%	44%	NM	—	—	17%	15%	30%	41%	40%
DE	11%	11%	11%	—	18%	21%	20%	NV	—	—	19%	—	31%	36%	35%
FL	—	20%	20%	17%	25%	32%	31%	NY	—	18%	19%	—	24%	32%	—
GA	—	13%	13%	9%	21%	25%	23%	OH	13%	15%	16%	10%	23%	29%	26%
HI	—	—	19%	12%	18%	37%	30%	OK	—	13%	13%	—	—	19%	21%
IA	—	—	—	17%	21%	26%	21%	OR	20%	20%	20%	—	28%	36%	38%
ID	—	—	—	8%	16%	22%	18%	PA	15%	15%	15%	15%	18%	26%	—
IL	—	17%	18%	11%	21%	30%	28%	RI	19%	19%	19%	18%	28%	34%	29%
IN	10%	12%	12%	11%	20%	23%	21%	SC	—	12%	13%	14%	8%	20%	25%
KS	—	14%	14%	14%	18%	26%	23%	SD	—	13%	14%	—	18%	22%	21%
KY	—	18%	18%	—	22%	28%	30%	TN	—	13%	13%	13%	15%	20%	—
LA	—	—	—	—	—	18%	22%	TX	—	—	11%	7%	15%	26%	—
MA	13%	13%	13%	13%	18%	28%	24%	UT	12%	13%	14%	9%	19%	29%	25%
MD	—	20%	20%	18%	24%	31%	30%	VA	12%	11%	11%	12%	11%	20%	19%
ME	16%	16%	17%	18%	21%	30%	26%	VT	11%	12%	13%	16%	23%	—	—
MI	16%	21%	20%	21%	24%	39%	32%	WA	15%	15%	15%	9%	18%	33%	30%
MN	13%	14%	14%	—	—	30%	—	WI	12%	13%	13%	13%	16%	22%	—
MO	11%	12%	13%	15%	17%	24%	23%	WV	—	19%	20%	19%	13%	29%	28%

Note: Only data taken from state departments of education are included in this table.

Source: Return to Learn Tracker, “Chronic Absenteeism: 2017–2023,” American Enterprise Institute, January 2024, <https://www.returntolearntracker.net>.

Table A4. Change in Chronic Absenteeism Rate by District Type: 2018–23

District Type		2018	2019	2022	2023
Achievement	Low	19%	20%	36%	33%
	Medium	16%	16%	30%	28%
	High	11%	11%	21%	21%
Poverty	Low	12%	12%	23%	22%
	Medium	16%	15%	29%	28%
	High	20%	20%	37%	33%
Minority Percentage	Low	14%	13%	24%	22%
	Medium	13%	12%	25%	23%
	High	17%	17%	32%	30%
In-Person Instruction in 2021	Most Remote	17%	17%	31%	29%
	Middle	13%	13%	26%	24%
	Least Remote	13%	13%	25%	23%
Single-Parent Percentage	Low	12%	12%	23%	22%
	Medium	15%	14%	28%	26%
	High	17%	17%	31%	29%
Size	Small	15%	15%	26%	24%
	Medium	15%	14%	26%	24%
	Large	15%	15%	29%	27%

Source: Return to Learn Tracker, “Chronic Absenteeism: 2017–2023,” American Enterprise Institute, January 2024, <https://www.returntolearntracker.net>.

Table A5. Ns for Table 3. Chronic Absenteeism by Student Race: 2020 and 2022

Poverty	2020			2022		
	Low	Middle	High	Low	Middle	High
Asian	899,000	468,000	421,000	891,000	454,000	395,000
Black	1,417,000	1,877,000	2,798,000	1,392,000	1,815,000	2,636,000
Hispanic	2,379,000	3,098,000	3,868,000	2,441,000	3,101,000	3,758,000
White	7,970,000	6,930,000	5,312,000	7,469,000	6,548,000	4,998,000
Achievement	Low	Middle	High	Low	Middle	High
Asian	310,000	479,000	971,000	285,000	455,000	972,000
Black	3,137,000	1,823,000	1,127,000	2,951,000	1,753,000	1,128,000
Hispanic	3,877,000	3,381,000	1,950,000	3,780,000	3,357,000	2,015,000
White	3,841,000	6,925,000	9,177,000	3,560,000	6,517,000	8,682,000
District Urbanicity	Urban	Suburban	Rural	Urban	Suburban	Rural
Asian	644,000	1,093,000	121,000	605,000	1,090,000	119,000
Black	2,860,000	2,672,000	1,026,000	2,705,000	2,625,000	988,000
Hispanic	3,931,000	4,174,000	1,685,000	3,821,000	4,228,000	1,737,000
White	3,655,000	9,004,000	7,989,000	3,361,000	8,418,000	7,675,000
2021 Instruction	Most Remote	Middle	Most In-Person	Most Remote	Middle	Most In-Person
Asian	929,000	446,000	386,000	887,000	440,000	387,000
Black	2,935,000	1,327,000	1,806,000	2,767,000	1,289,000	1,762,000
Hispanic	3,675,000	2,330,000	3,178,000	3,598,000	2,355,000	3,180,000
White	5,026,000	7,302,000	6,668,000	4,573,000	6,889,000	6,379,000

Note: The table excludes California entirely due to missing 2020 data, and it excludes districts with missing achievement data from Stanford Education Data Archive data and 2021 instructional data from AEI's Return to Learn instructional tracker.

Source: Author's calculations using Ed Data Express, Chronically Absent Students School Data, 2019–20 and 2021–22; and National Center for Education Statistics, Common Core of Data, Public Elementary/Secondary School Universe Survey Data, version 1a, <https://nces.ed.gov/ccd/pubschuniv.asp>.

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26. Not all state provided both numerators and denominators. Where necessary, I algebraically derived numerators or denominators when rates were available but either numerators or denominators were unavailable.
27. For the most up-to-date data, see Return to Learn Tracker, “Chronic Absenteeism: 2017–2023,” American Enterprise Institute, www.ReturntoLearnTracker.net/ChronicAbsenteeism.
28. US Department of Education, Ed Data Express, website, <https://eddataexpress.ed.gov>.
29. Ideally, this report would use enrollment counts that include all students who are enrolled for at least 10 days, but such data are not currently available from any source.
30. Educational Opportunity Project at Stanford University, website, <https://edopportunity.org>.
31. US Department of Education, Institute of Education Sciences, National Center for Education Statistics, “School District Geographic Relationship Files,” <https://nces.ed.gov/programs/edge/geographic/relationshipfiles>.
32. Washington, DC, had a higher rate in 2019, at 33 percent, but it is not a state and thus a poor comparison. Of those with state-supplied data, Connecticut had the lowest rate at 10 percent in 2019. See Table A2.
33. Unfortunately, Rhode Island’s performance on this metric is largely due to its unusually high rates in 2019.
34. See these data at Return to Learn Tracker, website, <https://www.returntolearntracker.net>.
35. Education Opportunity Project at Stanford University, “2019–2022 Change in Average Math Achievement in the U.S.,” <https://edopportunity.org/recovery/#/chart/none/districts/mth1922/fr1/all/3.15/37.39/-96.78>.
36. District terciles are student weighted and thus include similar numbers of students in each.
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