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# Meeting the Chronic Absenteeism Challenge What Do We Know?

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This brief aims to provide a synthesis of what we know about the district and school challenges of post-pandemic chronic absenteeism, and what can be done to meet them. It further analyzes existing federal and state data on chronic absenteeism, shows variation across states on key metrics, and examines the evidence-base on what has proven effective in reducing it.

By now, most of us are aware that chronic absenteeism rates doubled post-pandemic. The multiplicity of personal, health, social, economic, and educational disruptions caused by the pandemic made it harder for millions of students to be in school every day, even as the direct health impact of Covid-19 receded.

But what does a doubling of the number of students who are missing a month or more of schooling in the school year mean? What do the numbers tell us about the challenges our schools and communities face, and what does the evidence base say about the types of solutions and responses that are needed to meet them?

## It's a big problem.

With close to 15 million students chronically absent in the 2021-22 school year, two-thirds of the K-12 students in the US were attending a school where at least twenty percent of the student body was chronically absent. This is problematic because research has shown that when a school's chronic absenteeism rates are at these levels, the whole student body can be impacted. Not only are a fifth or more of students experiencing interrupted schooling, but the instructional pace of the whole school is interrupted when teachers constantly have a shifting set of students in their classrooms. If they slow down to catch up the students who were absent the prior day, they lose the attention of the students who were there. If they keep moving ahead, the students who were absent feel lost, and can demand additional attention. Given the unprecedented number of schools with chronic absenteeism rates of twenty percent or more in 2021-22, we need to understand that the pandemic has caused two plus years of interrupted learning in most locations.

## High rates of chronic absenteeism spread to districts that had not experienced it before.

Prior to the pandemic, chronic absenteeism was a significant challenge, and its impact was heavily concentrated in schools serving students from high poverty neighborhoods. Like a tsunami wave, bringing waves of water to dry land, the impact of the pandemic spread chronic absenteeism far and wide across the country. As seen in [this map](#), created by the Everyone Graduates Center at Johns Hopkins University, in nearly all states, the majority of school districts had chronic absenteeism rates of twenty percent or higher in 2021-22; many experienced rates of thirty percent or more. Rural areas were not immune from large increases. Looking at the five rural districts in each state, with the greatest number of chronically absent students, shows that 138 rural districts had between 1,000 and 9,000 chronically absent students. This means that large numbers of school districts were confronted with an issue with which they had little experience, accumulated know-how, or established response systems.

## In districts where chronic absenteeism had been a challenge prior to the pandemic, post-pandemic levels exceeded the capacity of existing response systems.

Before the pandemic, a district with a high rate of chronic absenteeism typically had rates between twenty and thirty percent. Post-pandemic, many of these districts saw their chronic absenteeism rates soar to fifty percent or higher. In short, missing a month or more of schooling became the normal experience for the majority of students in the district. When this occurs for a district of any size, the sheer number of students who were chronically absent becomes daunting. A large district with 80,000 students could have 45,000 who were chronically absent. A smaller district of 10,000 could have 5,000 chronically absent students. The intensity of the challenge might be best seen at the school level. In 27 states in 2021-22, half of the chronically absent students in the state attended a school where there were 200 or more chronically absent students. Think for a moment of what a school faces in reaching out to and supporting over two hundred students who are facing assorted challenges to attending school on a regular basis. Very few school's student support systems were built for this scale and intensity of need. In 35 states, there were between 100 and 950 schools where 200 or more students were chronically absent. In the four largest states plus Arizona, there were between 1,000 and 3,000 schools with 200 or more chronically absent students.

Thus, even districts and schools which have prior experience with chronic absenteeism and response systems in place, find their experience and systems strained by the sheer volume of chronically absent students.

### ***Explore the data***

State-level data on the number of schools with more than 100 and 200 chronically absent students, as well as the percent of chronically absent students in the state attending those schools.

[Download Excel file.](#)

## Half of the nation's chronically absent students are concentrated in just six percent (1,000) of school districts, which are located in every state.

The significant increase in chronic absenteeism rates in the school districts that had the highest rates of chronic absenteeism before the pandemic resulted in half of all chronically absent students in the nation being concentrated in just 1,000 (6%) of the nation's roughly 17,000 school districts. In 36 states half of chronically absent students are concentrated in twenty or fewer school districts in the state. Districts' ability to establish comprehensive and effective responses aligned with the scale and intensity of their attendance challenge will have outsized impacts on state and national chronic absenteeism rates and related educational and well-being outcomes.

The other half of the nation's chronically absent students are found everywhere, spread across the remaining 94% (16,000) of school districts.

### ***Explore the data***

State-level data on the number of districts accounting for 25%, 33%, and 50% of all chronically absent students at the height of the pandemic's impact (2021-22). [Download Excel file.](#)

District-level data for districts accounting for 25% of a state's chronically absent students. [Download Excel file.](#)

## We are beginning to see signs of improvement at the district level, but progress is uneven, with some districts doing better and others seeing no change or doing worse.

State-level data assembled by AEI for the 2022-23 school year is now available for over 30 states. Further analysis of the AEI data shows substantial numbers of districts are beginning to see significant reductions in their chronic absenteeism rates, with declines of five percentage points or more. In all states, at least some districts had improvements of this magnitude. In 18 states, one third or more of districts saw their chronic absenteeism rate decline by five percentage points or more. In North Carolina and Michigan, over 50% of districts reported these improvements.

At the same time, however, in more than half the states, the number of districts with no improvement or worsening chronic absenteeism rates exceed those demonstrating significant improvements. Moreover, all states had some districts with worsening rates.

### ***Explore the data***

State-level district counts and share of districts with improvement, or no change/increase between school year 21-22 and school year 22-23. [Download Excel file.](#)

Additional state-level detail on district changes in chronic absenteeism rates (school year 21-22 to school year 22-23). [Download Excel file.](#)

## The uneven nature of improvement from 2021-22 to 2022-23 suggests that district actions or inactions matter.

The fact that, within states, some districts saw significant improvements in their chronic absenteeism rate while others saw no change or worsening indicates that the overall improvement observed in 2022-23 is not primarily the result of broad national trends. For example, some students and families may be bouncing back on their own from the impacts of the pandemic on school attendance. This likely is the case for some, but it was not a strong enough national force between 2021-22 and 2022-23 to consistently improve chronic absenteeism across all districts. The pattern across districts within states suggests that district level actions are making a difference in some districts. It's really only North Carolina and Michigan where over half the districts had substantial improvement that it might be possible to talk about a state-wide impact. More targeted state-level actions could well be the reason why some districts saw improvements, but overall, the pattern across states indicates that district actions matter.

## Different approaches will be needed for concentration and spread districts but all districts with a chronic absenteeism challenge will benefit from having a comprehensive, evidenced-based approach.

Districts with high concentrations and very large numbers of chronically absent students are going to need a comprehensive set of strategies designed for the sheer scale of their challenge, and resources in the form of both people and dollars, to help implement and sustain them. Districts experiencing significant chronic absenteeism for the first time, but with less overwhelming numbers of chronic absent students, need access to evidence-based strategies tailored to their local circumstances, on-call technical assistance, and the ability to network and learn from and share learnings with similar districts.

What we know about what works for reducing chronic absenteeism indicates that all districts who face a chronic absenteeism challenge can benefit from a core set of evidence-based strategies detailed below.

## Good data will be essential to reducing chronic absenteeism.

Students miss school for multiple reasons, for different reasons on different days, with variation by grade-span, time, and place. It is one reason why addressing chronic absenteeism is challenging. Pre- and post-pandemic, we have a decent understanding that beyond illness and family vacations, the reasons for absenteeism broadly fall into four categories: external barriers keeping students out of school; students avoiding something in school or on the way to or from school; disengagement from schooling or being in school; and misconceptions. The pandemic has clearly created new reasons within these categories and changed what the primary drivers of absenteeism in a community may be. Since different reasons require different responses, it is critical for schools and districts to have a data-informed sense of the main reasons for absenteeism among students in their community. Surveys and attendance audits can help, but it is also important to strengthen family engagement and involve students in efforts to understand what makes it challenging for them to attend and how it can be addressed.

In addition, states, districts, and schools need to work together to enable better access to real-time attendance data. Traditionally, states report chronic absenteeism data once a year, for the prior year. This is not actionable. Some states like Connecticut have moved to reporting chronic absenteeism monthly, so it is possible to see if, for example, efforts to reduce chronic absenteeism in the fall of the current year are making a difference, giving time to expand them or refine them in the second semester. At the district and school level, weekly attendance data that can be disaggregated by sub-groups and grade with data analysis tools that help district and school attendance teams see patterns and trends, is needed. Schools need to be alerted to talk with students and families and to support and problem solve when needed, when students are trending towards chronically absent (i.e. have missed 10% of prior month(s)), rather than waiting until they have missed 18 days.

Finally, more schools and districts need what some are beginning to use: data systems that, in addition to monitoring attendance, let them enter and track the effectiveness of the strategies and interventions they use to impact attendance. This is the only way to really learn what works locally, for which students, under what circumstances, and to continually improve.

**Evidence-based strategies exist. The challenge is weaving them into a comprehensive response that includes prevention, problem solving, and mitigation efforts.**

The good news is that evidence-based strategies to reduce chronic absenteeism exist. They can be found, among other places, at the Attendance Works website, the Attendance Playbook, the GRAD Partnership's Chronic Absenteeism Toolkit and the National Partnership for Student Success Support Hub Digital Backpack: Resources to Address Chronic Absenteeism in Your Community. They include family engagement and home visits, wrap-around student supports, school-based health clinics, nudge letters, strategies that increase school connectedness, and student success systems. These systems bring together early warning indicators, attendance teams, multi-tiered student supports, success coaches and mentors in coordinated and ongoing analysis and continuous improvement actions.

The challenge is that no single strategy or response will be sufficient. Schools and districts will need to bundle multiple strategies into a comprehensive approach that includes prevention efforts, problem solving responses aligned to the major sources of absenteeism in their districts, and mitigation actions that help students recover the learning and social connections lost when they are absent. These include supportive processes to make up missing assignments, high dosage tutoring, and out-of-school-time and summer learning opportunities. How this can be done and examples of districts doing it are to be showcased at the White House's Every Day Counts: Addressing Chronic Absenteeism and Student Engagement summit.

## **We need an all-hands-on-deck approach**

Applying evidence-based strategies in a customized and comprehensive manner to address an unprecedented scale and scope of chronic absenteeism will require significant person power to serve as mentors, tutors, and success coaches, and organize and operate attendance/student success teams. An all-hands-on-deck approach is needed, with school staff, parents and community partners working side by side to prevent chronic absenteeism and resolve the issues driving it.

It will also require a multi-sector approach, with education and health sectors each supporting the other, and mayors, governors, and the federal government working together to address transportation, housing, and employment barriers to daily school attendance. Some creativity is needed throughout. For example, finding ways for teenagers to earn income while still going to school on a regular basis.

## Student success teams can weave a comprehensive response together and continually improve it

Combining data, evidence-based strategies, and community partners together into an effective comprehensive response is no small task. To achieve it, schools and districts need dedicated student success teams. These are teams composed of everyone who plays a key role in addressing the causes of absenteeism in the community, or providing support to students to mitigate the educational and well-being impacts of missing school. Student success teams need to have regularly scheduled collaborative work time, ready access to as real time as possible data, and leadership support and endorsement. They also need to develop a means to include family and student voice in attendance improvement efforts.

Disconnections and silos among disparate but related student support efforts are a serious challenge. Too many schools and districts engage people who have a role to play in improving attendance, a scattered, and isolated, in positions and offices, designed to address only a single dimension of the multi-dimensional problem of chronic absenteeism. At the school level, counselors, mental health staff, the school nurse, behavioral specialist, MTSS and PBIS coordinators, non-profit student support partners, administrators, and teachers, all come to know different aspects of students and work on specific issues usually in isolation. Much greater impacts are observed when all of them are brought together on a regular basis, at least bi-weekly to collectively analyzed data, pool insights and knowledge, and develop comprehensive strategies they can all support. The same phenomenon plays out at the district level, and calls for a district wide student success or attendance team.

## We face a near-term crisis and a long-term challenge. We can do something about both.

The current rates of chronic absenteeism require all-hands-on-deck efforts to greatly increase the number of students who attend school on a regular basis. Simply put, for the vast majority of students, being in school is a good place to be. The academic, social, and well-being impacts are large, as are the costs of not being there. This brief has attempted to synthesize what we know about how this can be done. It involves increasing the flow of actionable data to district and school teams. It centers around a comprehensive and systematic approach with three elements: First, districts and schools need to know their challenge by understanding the primary local drivers of why students are not attending regularly. Second, they need to organize a response that puts a strong emphasis on prevention, through building relationships with families and students. It also requires a robust problem-solving capacity in which families and students are included as key contributors. All key players must work together to take action to mitigate the academic, social, and well-being consequences of missing school, as it can take time to fully resolve the issues keeping students from regular attendance. And finally, districts and schools will need to align their resources. This involves first taking stock of what they have and breaking down silos so existing resources can be applied holistically.

It is also important to make attendance improvement a key component of other on-going reforms- from the science of reading, to high dosage tutoring, and school improvement. Once existing resources are aligned and integrated, many schools and districts will still need more capacity or help in specific areas, this is where strategic partnerships with local non-profits, government agencies, higher education institutions, and employers comes in.

At the same time, as we work to enable more students to attend school regularly, we need to recognize that we will need to continually work to make school a good place to be for all students. At the most basic level this means working to have positive conditions for learning, where all students feel agency, belonging, and connectedness, the new ABC's. But it also means recognizing that schools require redesigning in order to truly make them a place where everyone wants to be, and to ensure they are places that reliably put students on a pathway to adult success. Considerable work around school redesign has been launched in the past decade, from Linked Learning, to XQ, to the Cross-State High School Redesign Collaborative, and the recent National School Redesign showcase, and we need to accelerate it in the decade to come.

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