

Policy Backgrounder: Student Attendance and Chronic Absenteeism

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For several decades, education leaders and stakeholders have targeted student truancy and the unfavorable outcomes associated with frequent unexcused absences. However, the impact of unexcused absences has recently raised alarm, particularly as schools attempt to recover student learning following disruptions from the pandemic. Chronic absenteeism – when a student is absent 10 percent of the school year or more for any reason – has become a significant challenge in schools across income levels and geographic regions. Leaders on all levels are pursuing interventions of varying degrees from legal to social service support to improve student attendance and overall wellbeing.

- Nearly 8 million students were chronically absent in 2019. This [doubled](#) to 16 million in 2022.
- Absenteeism rose across income levels. Rates [nearly doubled](#) from 10 percent to 19 percent in higher income districts and rose from 19 to 32 percent in lower income districts.
- Chronic absenteeism can lead to [poor academic performance](#). Absenteeism can also predict whether students will drop out before graduation, which can lead to negative health outcomes and lower lifetime earnings.
- In 2024, [71 bills related to student attendance were introduced](#) in 28 states by both Republican and Democratic lawmakers; 14 bills were enacted.

Student Attendance Challenges

Across the country, schools are reopening to welcome students back from summer break. However, open buildings do not automatically translate to present students. If the past few years are predictive of the upcoming school year, many students will miss a concerning number of days of school. Students who miss 10 percent or more days of school for any reason, including excused absences and suspensions, are considered chronically absent. The classification is [broader than truancy](#), which only includes unexcused absences, but it similarly harms students. Attendance challenges have been associated with poor student socioemotional and academic outcomes. Absenteeism also undermines classroom instruction and academic interventions, which is particularly threatening given ongoing learning recovery efforts across the country following the pandemic.

Chronic absenteeism has challenged the US education system for [some time](#). The issue became more identifiable following the implementation of the [Every Student Succeeds Act](#) of 2015, which [prompted more states](#) to report data on chronic absenteeism. At the time, over 7 million students (about 1 in 6) were chronically absent. The number rose to [nearly 8 million students](#) in 2019 before doubling to 16 million in 2022, following the pandemic. Historically, chronic absenteeism has been most prominent in schools that serve large numbers of students from [families with low incomes](#). However, the pandemic exacerbated the issue in districts across size and income levels. Rates [nearly doubled](#) from 10 percent to 19 percent in higher income districts and rose from 19 to 32 percent in lower income districts.

The consequences are dire. Experts report that absenteeism can result in [test score declines](#) of up to 27 percent in math and 45 percent in reading. Many districts use early warning systems to identify attendance challenges, but more intentional interventions are needed, [according to researchers](#).

Low attendance has been linked to a [number of root causes](#) and experts group it into four categories: barriers, aversions, disengagement, and misconceptions. Barriers may include chronic or acute illness, lack of school supplies or clothes, lack of transportation, family responsibilities, and community safety. Aversions are factors that lead students to resist going to school such as anxiety, a negative school climate, bullying, an undiagnosed disability, or academic challenges. Students who fall into the disengagement category are often bored, lack meaningful relationships with school staff, and/or lack academic and behavioral support. Misconceptions lead to absenteeism when students and/or parents underestimate total absences and the impact of each missed day.

Unfortunately, the pandemic added new dimensions to the root causes. More [than 300,000 children](#) in the US lost a primary caregiver to COVID as of June 2023 leading to disruption in family structures and stability. The barrier of transportation grew after the pandemic, in part due to the ongoing [bus driver shortage](#). [School teacher](#) and staff shortages also increased significantly and persists, thus complicating school climate and service delivery. Some suggest that disruptions from COVID-related school closures led parents and students to [fall out of the routine](#) of attending school and diminished the value placed on regular school attendance. Some parents have also become more cautious and keep children home when allergies or asthma symptoms cannot be distinguished from the signs of COVID.

Additionally, a [recent poll](#) revealed the disconnect between parental understanding and awareness of student absenteeism issues. Only 6 percent of parents reported having a chronically absent student, an underrepresentation based on national attendance data, and only 1 in 3 parents could properly define the term. When asked to identify the most worrisome issues in K-12 education, only 5 percent identified chronic absenteeism in comparison to ‘young people not being prepared for the future’ which received 40 percent of votes and is ironically tied to regular school attendance.

State Policy Interventions

State leaders have made student attendance issues a higher priority in recent years. Yet many state policies only address habitual unexcused absences (truancies) as opposed to all absences (chronic absenteeism), which can equally have [implications](#) on student academic achievement. Attendance strategies also vary and range from punitive to preventative or both. In 2024, [71 bills related to student attendance were introduced](#) in 28 states by both Republicans and Democrats; 14 were enacted.

Louisiana [established a task force](#) to study school start times, in part to address absenteeism, noting “adjusting school start times to align more closely with adolescents’ natural sleep is an evidence-based strategy to improve attendance rates...” Legislators also amended an attendance law to [require parents of truant students](#) to ensure student participation in supplemental instruction such as afterschool tutoring and weekend make-up classes to catch up on school work. The law also reiterates legal penalties for truancy and requires parents of truant students to attend support and assistance events regularly. Additionally, the law now requires school principals to note student attendance on Supplemental Security Income forms where applicable.

[Kentucky](#) legislators also amended a law focusing on truancy to specify the number of unexcused absences that should trigger school personnel reporting to the county attorney. In [Indiana, legislators](#) required schools to establish truancy prevention policies for students in K-6 and deliver an attorney notice to parents of children with attendance violations. The new law also requires the state attendance officer to submit legislative ideas to the legislative council annually based on local attendance and prevention needs, which opens the door to potentially address attendance challenges more broadly in the future.

[New Mexico](#) is also gathering information through a newly commissioned study on middle school education by the Legislative Education Study Committee. The bill language authorizing the study highlights the rise in absenteeism that typically occurs in middle school.

[Minnesota](#) established a student attendance pilot program to encourage innovative strategies to improve student attendance and engagement. Those strategies include interventions to address risk factors for high absenteeism, wrap-around services that focus on the individual needs of students, home visits, connecting families to resources, tutoring, ensuring a sense of belonging in school, and enhanced communication with families.

In California, a law authorizes the establishment of school attendance review boards at the county and local levels to promote alternatives to the legal ramifications associated with student attendance challenges. To further encourage preventative strategies, state legislators [expanded the law](#) to require the State Department of Education to “post information on its internet website about methods of reducing chronic absenteeism, including through the formation of school site absence intervention teams [.]”

[West Virginia](#) enacted a range of provisions. The new legislation reiterates the requirement for the State Board to implement a system of support plan for student absences and provides exceptions and supports for students who are pregnant and/or parenting. The law also updates parental consequences for truancy and establishes a provision to encourage truancy diversion support and informal resolution.

Legislators in Utah enacted four bills relating to student attendance, truancy, and absenteeism. One bill allows schools to incorporate student attendance into [course scores or grades](#) while another prevents the use of [attendance data in teacher evaluations](#). To target truancy specifically, a new bill adds [truancy to the school disciplinary](#) and law enforcement action guidelines. Additionally, a new law adds [attendance reporting](#) to the state superintendent’s annual report including attendance by grade level, percentage of students chronically absent, percentage of excused absences, and percentage of unexcused absences.

Conclusion

As chronic absenteeism persists, more states and education stakeholders are exploring root causes and developing innovative strategies to encourage regular student attendance. Experts continue to [gather data and information](#) about the most effective and ineffective strategies to guide schools and local leaders in identifying evidence-based practices. Student absenteeism is one of the most significant factors related to student academic wellbeing and learning recovery, especially following the pandemic. Reversing the absenteeism trend is paramount to the academic and future success of students across the nation.

About the Authors

[David Young](#) is the President of the Committee for Economic Development, the public policy center of The Conference Board.

[Cindy Cisneros](#) is the Vice President of Education Programs at the Committee for Economic Development, the public policy center of The Conference Board.

[Tia Collier](#) is the Senior Education Policy Analyst at the Committee for Economic Development, the public policy center of The Conference Board.

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