



# ADDRESSING CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM IN SCHOOLS NATIONWIDE



In early 2024, U.S. Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona wrote a letter to education leaders and policymakers nationwide, and highlighted a troubling trend: chronic absenteeism remains at historic levels.

“As of the 2021-22 school year, over 14 million students nationwide were chronically absent, missing valuable instructional time and posing serious implications for students’ overall academic success and wellbeing,” Cardona said. “I’m writing today to ask each State to commit to three key actions that can help more students attend and engage in school each day.”<sup>1</sup>

Cardona’s urgent message could not have come at a more critical time. Chronic absenteeism is defined as missing at least 10% of a school year, typically 18-20 days total, for any reason.<sup>2</sup> Once considered a “hidden educational crisis,”<sup>3</sup> it has become one of the central challenges facing K-12 public education nationwide.

“What we’re seeing is a large-scale failure for a substantial number of our students to reengage,” said Stanford economist Thomas Dee in an article published by Vox.<sup>4</sup> “And it’s a very serious problem because we’re in the middle of a very important effort to try to address the educational harm that has unfairly fallen on this generation of students.”

## Understanding Absenteeism as a Problem for Everyone

The numbers are startling. According to data from the American Enterprise Institute, a leading public policy think tank, the share of U.S. students who are chronically absent has increased dramatically in recent years to 28% during the 2021-22 school year and 26% through the 2022-23 school year.

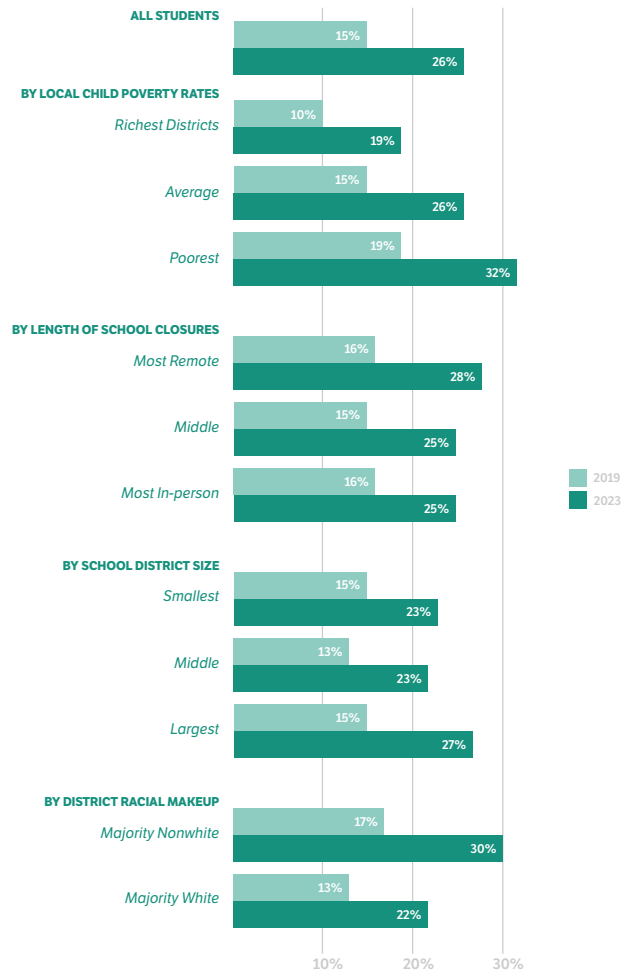
This is double the share seen before the pandemic.<sup>5</sup>

Complicating matters is research that has found increased student absences can lead to even more absenteeism among classmates. In fact, when “10 percent of a student’s classmates are absent on a given day, that student is more likely to be absent the following day.”<sup>6</sup>

This is concerning, as there exists a well-established body of research that links chronic absenteeism with a higher risk of adverse outcomes including diminished health, a greater likelihood of incarceration and fewer job opportunities.<sup>7</sup>

These increases in absenteeism are occurring in districts big and small, and across all races and income levels.

## Chronic Absenteeism Has Steadily Increased From 2019 to 2023<sup>8,9</sup>



1. Cardona, M. (2024, March 22). March 22, 2024 - Letter From Secretary Cardona Regarding Student Attendance and Engagement. Key Policy Letters Signed by the Education Secretary or Deputy Secretary. <https://www2.ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/secretletter/240322.html>

2. Education Healthcare Public Services. (2016, August 4). Chronic Absenteeism. American Federation of Teachers. <https://www.aft.org/childrens-health-safety-and-well-being/childrens-access-care/chronic-absenteeism>

3. U.S. Department of Education. (n.d.). Chronic Absenteeism in the Nation’s Schools. Chronic Absenteeism in the Nation’s Schools. <https://www2.ed.gov/datastory/chronicabsenteeism.html>

4. Cineas, F. (2024, January 9). Why So Many Kids Are Still Missing School. Vox. <https://www.vox.com/2024/1/9/23904542/chronic-absenteeism-school-attendance>

5. Mervosh, S., & Paris, F. (2024, March 29). Why School Absences Have ‘Exploded’ Almost Everywhere.

The New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2024/03/29/us/chronic-absences.html>

6. Ibid.,

7. Misha, A. (2024, March 4). Understanding and Addressing the Surge of Chronic Absenteeism - EdSurge News. EdSurge. <https://www.edsurge.com/news/2024-03-04-understanding-and-addressing-the-surge-of-chronic-absenteeism>

8. Mervosh, S., & Paris, F. (2024, March 29). Why School Absences Have ‘Exploded’ Almost Everywhere. The New York Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2024/03/29/us/chronic-absences.html>

9. Malkus, N. (2024, January 31). Long COVID for Public Schools: Chronic Absenteeism Before and After the Pandemic | American Enterprise Institute - AEI. Long COVID for Public Schools: Chronic Absenteeism Before and After the Pandemic. <https://www.aei.org/research-products/report/long-covid-for-public-schools-chronic-absenteeism-before-and-after-the-pandemic/>

“The problem got worse for everybody in the same proportional way,” said Nat Malkus, the senior fellow at the American Enterprise Institute responsible for collecting the data.

In an article published in The New York Times titled “Why School Absences Have ‘Exploded’ Almost Everywhere,” Sarah Mervosh and Francesca Paris explore the multilayered and nuanced reasons for this phenomenon.

Through their extensive research and interviews with educators and district administrators, the authors found a variety of factors negatively impacting student attendance. These included an increase in students grappling with mental health challenges, more students taking care of their younger siblings and even a surge in families opting for vacations during the school year.

Katie Rosenbaum, a psychologist and associate research professor with the Center for Child and Family Policy at Duke University, summarized the post-COVID educational landscape succinctly: “Our relationship with school became optional.”

## Examining the Root Causes of Chronic Absenteeism<sup>13</sup>

While there are many reasons why a student might miss school, Attendance Works, a nonprofit organization with a mission to promote equal opportunities to learn and advance student success by reducing chronic absence, has broadly sorted the root causes of absenteeism into three categories.

### Barriers

- Illness
- Family responsibilities
- Poor transportation
- Housing and food insecurity
- Unpredictable schedule
- Lack of access to technology

### Aversion

- Academic and/or behavioral challenges
- Unwelcoming school climate
- Anxiety
- Undiagnosed disability
- Social and peer challenges
- Influence by caregivers who had negative educational experiences

### Disengagement

- Boredom
- Lack of meaningful relationships to adults in the school
- Shortage of enrichment opportunities
- Poor academic and behavioral support systems
- Conflicts with work schedule
- Deficiency of culturally responsive instruction

In an opinion piece published in Education Week, Attendance Works Founder Hedy N. Chang and Communications Director Catherine M. Cooney explain that while the situation might look bleak today, their research and work with districts nationwide has shown them concrete steps that can reduce chronic absenteeism. The first of these, they argue, is respecting the link between engagement and attendance.

“If students and families do not feel engaged and connected to their schools, they are more likely to be chronically absent,” Chang and Cooney explained.

## Why Escondido Union School District Partnered With the National Inventors Hall of Fame to Engage Students



Following COVID-19-related building closures, California’s Escondido Union School District (EUSD) understood that to best support students, the district needed to reengage them and help get them excited about school.

“Some of the challenges that Escondido, as well as all school districts, are experiencing are the return from the pandemic and distance learning,

and knowing that there are not only learning gaps but there’s also engagement gaps,” said Rick Oser, director of extended learning intervention and enrichment at EUSD, in an interview with the National Inventors Hall of Fame®. “Escondido was really purposeful in selecting the National Inventors Hall of Fame’s curriculum so that we can address the achievement gap, but also the engagement gap.”

EUSD worked with the National Inventors Hall of Fame to create a customized invention education program designed to spark joy among teachers and students alike.

By inviting participants to discover or “invent” solutions to real-world problems, this active approach to learning engages students by encouraging them to follow their interests and passions.

As teacher absences have also significantly increased post-pandemic due to burnout and fatigue, for EUSD, identifying an education partner that made implementation easy and straightforward was a priority.

“Every single teacher has said how much they’re enjoying teaching the curriculum ... and when teachers are having fun, that’s going to translate to students having fun,” Oser said. “But it’s not just fun for fun in itself. It’s actually meaningful, purposeful, and the result is our students are learning.”



A program participant explores the inner workings of their microphone.

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11. Ibid.,

12. Attendance Works. (n.d.). Mission and Vision. Mission and Vision. <https://www.attendanceworks.org/mission/>

13. Attendance Works. (2022, September). Root Causes. Root Causes. <https://www.attendanceworks.org/chronic-absence/addressing-chronic-absence/3-tiers-of-intervention/root-causes/#:~:text=Reasons%20for%20absences%20typically%20fall,about%20the%20impact%20of%20absences>

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