

Seize the Data: Using Chronic Absence Data to Drive Student Engagement

A joint publication of CSBA and Attendance Works

IN THIS BRIEF:

- ▶ The state of chronic absenteeism in California
- ▶ What student groups are disproportionately impacted by chronic absenteeism
- ▶ Questions for board members to ask when assessing chronic absenteeism
- ▶ What board members can do to address absenteeism
- ▶ Resources for board members

Chronic absence, defined in California as missing 10 percent or more of school days for any reason, remains a major issue in the state. Data from the California Department of Education (CDE) shows a decrease from an all-time high of 30 percent in 2021–22 to 25 percent in 2022–23. That means 1,486,302 students in grades TK–12 missed 10 percent or more of the school year.

California is not alone in experiencing stubborn chronic absence rates. Other states, such as Connecticut, Massachusetts, Nevada and New Mexico, which have published data from the 2022–23 school year, also reveal chronic absence rates remain well above 2018–19 levels. The 2022–23 data reveals an attendance crisis that must be addressed to help students recover from the negative impacts of the pandemic on their mental and physical health as well as their academic progress.

Why attendance matters for student achievement and school finances

Chronic absence is an early warning sign of academic risk for students from preschool through high school.¹ Chronic absence includes both excused and unexcused absences as well as days

missed due to suspensions, and is different from truancy, which only includes unexcused absences.^{2,3}

High chronic absence rates:

- ▶ **Negatively affect student achievement, well-being, and graduation rates.** The research is clear: students who are chronically absent are less likely to read proficiently by third grade, have lower achievement in middle school, and are less likely to graduate from high school.⁴ Equally important, chronic absence is associated with lower levels of educational engagement, social-emotional development, and executive functioning.⁵
- ▶ **Hamper learning recovery efforts. California has poured billions of dollars into learning recovery efforts ranging from expanded learning opportunities to tutoring.** When students do not show up for part or all of these vital programs, the return on investment is lower and student outcomes often do not improve as much as desired. See this [RAND study](#) showing better outcomes for students who attended more of these programs.
- ▶ **Widen opportunity gaps.** Chronic absence disproportionately affects students from low-income backgrounds and other student groups, including those who are experiencing homelessness, in foster care, receiving special education services, or are part of historically underserved racial/ethnic groups.
- ▶ **Lower district funding.** California funds public schools based on average daily attendance (ADA), which attaches a heavy emphasis on attendance to district funding. There have been proposals to move away from ADA and toward enrollment-based funding in recent years; however, that change has not yet been passed by the Legislature.
- ▶ **Decrease enrollment.** Many districts in California are struggling with declines in enrollment.⁶ While more research is needed to confirm this association, common sense suggests that chronic absence is a potential indicator that students and families are not engaged and may leave a school system to seek alternative options for education such as private school or home schooling.

While local educational agency (LEA) accountability through the California School Dashboard for chronic absence was waived by the CDE during the height of the pandemic, districts and county offices of education (COEs) are once again being held accountable for chronic absence through the federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). California includes chronic absence as a K-8 indicator on the California School Dashboard and requires districts to set and measure progress on chronic absence in its Local Control and Accountability Plans (LCAPs).

Who are California’s chronically absent students?

At the state level, 2022–23 data show that 1,486,302 students were chronically absent.⁷ That is compared to 755,950 students in 2018–19, before the pandemic. To understand who is affected by chronic absence, it is important to disaggregate this information by examining both the composition of students who are chronically absent and which student groups are most affected by chronic absence (i.e. experience the highest rates). Such information helps school leaders understand how to tailor their strategies given the realities, challenges, and assets of the students and families who are affected by chronic absence.

By ethnicity

Figure 1 shows the ethnic composition of chronically absent students. While students in historically disadvantaged groups make up a smaller portion of the student populations, and thus a lesser percentage of the chronically absent students statewide, the data shows they tend to have much higher chronic absence rates, demonstrating the disproportionate impact of the issue. The largest proportion of chronically absent students are Latino at 65 percent, or 966,459 students, followed by white students at 16 percent (241,143).

American Indian/Alaska Native, Pacific Islanders and African American students have much higher rates of chronic absence despite making up a smaller proportion of the total population of chronically absent students. For example, in table one, African American students are disproportionately chronically absent at 37 percent; however, as shown in Table 1, they make up a smaller percentage, 7 percent (110,537), of all chronically absent students.

Figure 1
Proportion of chronically absent students by ethnicity

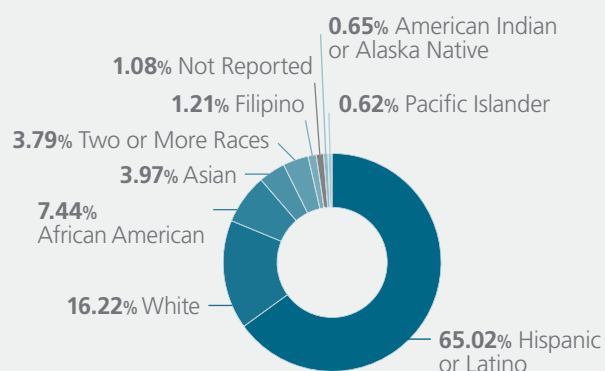


Table 1
Chronic absence in California by ethnicity

Student Group	Number of Students Enrolled	Number of Students Chronically Absent	Chronic Absence Rate by Student Group	Proportion of All Chronically Absent Students
All Students	5,958,889	1,486,302	24.90%	
African American	301,921	110,537	36.6%	7.44%
American Indian or Alaska Native	26,551	9,647	36.3%	0.65%
Asian	578,202	58,964	10.2%	3.97%
Filipino	134,249	17,988	13.4%	1.21%
Hispanic or Latino	3,344,977	966,459	28.9%	65.02%
Pacific Islander	25,120	9,191	36.6%	0.62%
White	1,221,741	241,143	19.7%	16.22%
Two or More Races	263,620	56,315	21.4%	3.79%
Not Reported	62,508	16,058	25.7%	1.08%

By student group

Socioeconomically disadvantaged students comprise the vast majority of chronically absent students at 77 percent.⁸ English learners make up nearly one out of four (23 percent) chronically absent students, and students with disabilities account for one out of five (20 percent). While youth in foster care and those experiencing homelessness are a much smaller percentage of the total number of students who are chronically absent, they are the most affected and have extremely high rates of chronic absence. See Table 2.

Table 2
Chronic absence in California by student group

Student Group	Number of Students Enrolled	Number of Students Chronically Absent	Chronic Absence Rate by Student Group	Proportion of All Chronically Absent Students
English Learners	1,197,569	336,136	28.10%	22.62%
Foster Youth	40,747	15,954	39.20%	1.07%
Homeless Youth	242,478	98,554	40.60%	6.63%
Migrant Education	49,806	11,212	22.50%	0.75%
Students With Disabilities	858,236	297,037	34.60%	19.98%
Socio-economically Disadvantaged	3,760,713	1,148,094	30.50%	77.25%

Grade spans

Statewide data also allows for examining chronic absence levels by grade span. As table 3 shows, kindergartners are the most affected by chronic absence (36 percent) while students in high school comprise about a third of all chronically absent students (35 percent). Further analysis of the kindergarten data shows that the vast majority, or 120,967 of the 187,719 chronically absent kindergartners, are Latino. See Table 3.

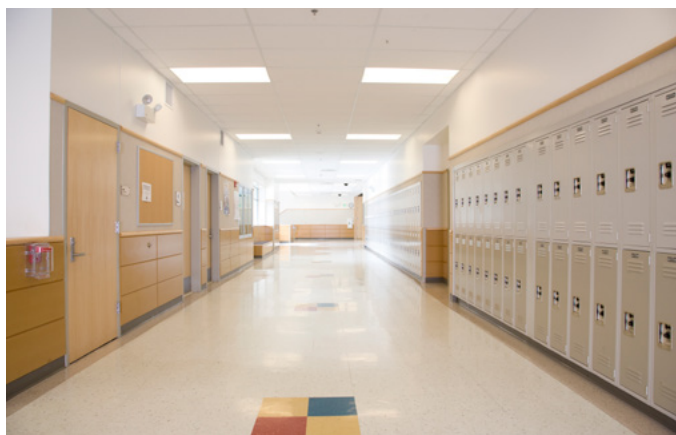


Table 3
Chronic absence in California by grade span

Grade Span	Total Number of Students	Number of Students Chronically Absent	Chronic Absence Rate by Student Group	Proportion of All Chronically Absent Students
K	516,681	187,719	36.30%	12.63%
Grades 1-3	1,266,699	309,500	24.40%	20.82%
Grades 4-6	1,318,062	270,008	20.50%	18.17%
Grades 7-8	888,084	202,692	22.80%	13.64%
Grades K-8	3,989,526	969,919	24.30%	65.26%
Grades 9-12	1,969,363	516,383	26.20%	34.74%
Totals	5,958,889	1,486,302	24.90%	

Understanding challenges and potential solutions

An essential key to solving chronic absence is understanding the challenges that cause students to miss school, as well as what helps engage and encourage students and families to show up regularly. While some socioeconomic factors such as housing instability are not easily addressed by LEAs alone, other factors such as school climate, attendance and discipline policies, or family and student engagement are within the locus of control of schools. When chronic absence affects larger numbers or percentages of students, it is typically a sign of districtwide challenges that require more systemic and programmatic solutions, as well as the support of community partners.

Implementing meaningful solutions requires deepening understanding of what affects attendance for the student groups who make up the largest numbers of chronically absent students and those groups who are disproportionately affected by chronic absence. Data on physical and mental health and economic and social well-being can be combined with chronic absence data to construct a broader, more comprehensive picture of students' realities.

When high levels of chronic absence are detected, surveys, focus groups, or other qualitative methods should be employed to gather insights directly from students and families. For example, to better understand the challenges facing chronically absent kindergartners, the Keep Learning California coalition, (composed of Attendance Works, Families in Schools, and the Parent Institute for Quality Education) held three focus groups with families of kindergartners (two in English and one in Spanish). These focus groups suggested that families with kindergartners felt confusion and concern about

when to keep their children home if they were not feeling well. Without better guidance from schools, they were likely to keep their children home when they were unsure. Families also shared it could be challenging to balance getting their child to school with addressing other family issues. In addition, families with first-time kindergartners were less likely to feel missing a few days of school would adversely affect their child's growth and development. To learn more, see the coalition's *Family Needs Assessment* report.

What can board members do to reduce chronic absence?

There are seven key steps that board members can take to address the attendance crisis in their districts.

- 1) Get the data.** As a board of education member, learning the level of chronic absence in your LEA is an essential first step. Board members, both in districts and COEs, should examine overall rates as well as rates by school, grade, and each student group. Trustees do not need to wait for CDE to release data. This can be done at a board meeting or by having the superintendent send the data to the board. Boards can and should request district staff to provide periodic updates during the school year to monitor progress toward goals and to determine if additional resources are needed.

Chronic absence DataQuest for prior school years is available in California through [DataQuest](#) on the CDE website. Additional data for individual LEAs can be found on the California School Dashboard, which tracks chronic absence in grades K-8 as an accountability measure. CDE updates the data annually, releasing chronic absence data for the prior school year toward the end of the first semester of the following school year.

- 2) Understand the makeup of chronically absent students.** When trying to understand which students are most impacted by chronic absences, governance team members will want to ask the following questions:
 - ▶ Which is the largest racial/ethnic group affected by chronic absence?
 - ▶ Which schools are most affected?
 - ▶ Which grade levels or grade spans are of greatest concern?
 - ▶ Are there other student groups that stand out?
 - ▶ How has the data changed over time?
- 3) Identify root causes and solutions.** Like the check engine light in a car, chronic absence is an indicator that district leadership and staff need to address quickly. High levels of chronic absence in a school or district are a red flag signaling that barriers to daily attendance may exist at home, in the community, within the school, or in a combination of these factors. High absentee levels may also be a signal that the positive learning conditions that make students want to come to school are not in place. These [positive conditions](#) include

healthy and safe school environments; a sense of belonging, connection and support; academic challenge and engagement; and adult and student well-being and emotional competence.

Board members can and should explore what is driving absenteeism in their schools through town halls, during board meetings, and in other venues — both formal and informal. They should seek opportunities to hear directly from students and families about what might be needed to achieve more equitable student outcomes, especially for the most marginalized students. Additionally, they should work with the administration to support a more structured [root cause analysis](#) of local data. Students and families are key to creating solutions and can offer insight into what might motivate students to regularly attend school.

Understanding the root causes of chronic absenteeism in a district can steer partnerships with public agencies and community organizations to help LEAs tailor and implement a tiered, comprehensive approach for improving attendance. These strategies should be reflected in district policies, LCAPs, school improvement plans, Expanded Learning Opportunity plans, and the allocation of [expanded learning resources](#).

- 4) Use data to invest in relationship building and engagement.** Chronic absence can be a sign that students are not feeling engaged and connected to school. Relationship building is a key first step. It is essential to finding out about more significant barriers. Use information about which schools, grades, or student groups are most affected by chronic absence to determine where to expand investments in relationship building.

Additionally, governance teams should encourage district staff to provide families with information on the importance of attendance. Some community members may not be aware of the detrimental educational impact of even missing a few days.

- 5) Promote equitable, problem-solving attendance practices.** CDE provides absentee data divided into excused and unexcused absences. This data allows governance teams to see differences in these categories by student population, school, and grade. Examining whether some student groups tend to have their absences labeled as unexcused at higher rates than other groups is important in terms of equity and local decision making. Excused absences have negative ramifications in terms of the lost instructional time that students experience. However, when absences are labeled unexcused, they carry a host of additional negative consequences that can include being denied credit for missed work, exclusion from extracurricular activities, and may eventually result in court appearances and fines.

A report by Policy Analysis for California Education, *Disparities in Unexcused Absences Across California*, found that socio-economically disadvantaged students are much more likely to have their absences labeled unexcused. Importantly, these disparities between racial/ethnic groups remain even when poverty is taken into account. Understanding what is causing

these differences requires hearing from students, families, and school staff about what causes students to miss school and how absences are labeled excused versus unexcused.

Disparities in unexcused absences among student groups can vary significantly across schools and districts. Again, local data will tell the story of what is happening in individual districts. If disparities exist for particular groups of students, that may be an indication that attendance policies should be closely examined to see if they unintentionally push students out rather than engage them in learning. This is where engagement with district staff, students, and families is essential to create a community of support around the vital nature of equity in attendance policy and enforcement.

As absences accumulate, responses from the district and state generally become more punitive. Yet, as this [blog](#) from Attendance Works discusses, punitive responses are unlikely to improve attendance when absences occur for reasons beyond the control of the student and their family. Rather, overuse of the unexcused absence label, and the additional punitive responses that those absences generate, could undermine efforts to partner with students and families to improve attendance.

6) Take an intradistrict team approach. Taking a team approach is essential for any school or district to bring down chronic absence rates. Working in a team enables a cross-disciplinary approach to solving challenges and draws upon a broader array of resources. At the school level, site leaders need effective teams to plan and implement tiered interventions. At the LEA level, central office leaders, in alignment with board policy, need to coordinate support to school teams across departments. Access Attendance Works guidance on forming district and school teams at [this link](#).

7) Plan funding for the long haul. Attendance promotion programs can be built in alignment with a district's long-term vision or mission. Chronic absence has a range of causes and requires an integrated, year-round approach to solutions, not a stand-alone attendance initiative. While pandemic era emergency funds from the Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) fund have been vital to addressing many pressing student needs, trustees must look beyond this one-time funding to sustain the work in the long term. Braiding together funding is key, but the strategies and process can be overwhelming for districts that do not have a robust administrative infrastructure to identify and apply for these resources.

There are a range of funding opportunities and resources to help address chronic absenteeism outside of traditional Local Control Funding Formula dollars. To help with identification, the following are examples — but not an exhaustive list — of federal and state funds that can be used for attendance and attendance-related interventions:

- ▶ Title I: Support for high-poverty schools and students
- ▶ Title II: Funding for teacher training
- ▶ Title IVa: Safe and healthy school grants for data and school climate
- ▶ Title IVe: Family engagement grants
- ▶ Title IVf: Community Schools grants
- ▶ The Bipartisan Safer Communities Act Stronger Connections Grant Program
- ▶ Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) dollars to support attendance for special education students
- ▶ McKinney-Vento money for homeless students
- ▶ Medicaid billing to pay for school clinics and staffing
- ▶ Expanded Learning Opportunities Program (ELO-P)
- ▶ Learning Communities for School Success Program (LCSSP)
- ▶ California Community Schools Partnership Program (CCSPP)

Board members should partner with their district or COE fiscal staff to evaluate sources of funding that meet the needs of their local attendance efforts.

Conclusion

Chronic absence is a critical issue that carries a wide range of negative consequences for student outcomes. It is also a significant problem that is lingering across the country. Local governance teams can play instrumental roles in addressing attendance at the local level. Addressing attendance-related issues takes the buy-in of the whole LEA community. By prioritizing attendance, boards can also increase the impact of the many other investments in teaching and learning.

In California, every board of education member has access to their LEA or school's chronic absence data. Governance teams should seize the opportunity to use this data to drive efforts to re-engage students and families in learning. High levels of chronic absence in schools are important indicators that districts should invest in analyzing its causes; reallocate district personnel and resources where they are most needed; and enlist the expertise and help of students, families, public agencies, and other community partners to identify and overcome barriers to attendance.



Relevant CSBA sample policies

CSBA provides several attendance-related sample policies to LEAs that subscribe to GAMUT Policy services. These include:

- ▶ BP/AR 5112.1 – Exemptions from attendance
- ▶ AR 5112.2 – Exclusions from attendance
- ▶ BP/AR 5113 – Absences and excuses
- ▶ BP/AR 5113.1 – Chronic absence and truancy
- ▶ BP 5113.11 – Attendance supervision
- ▶ BP/AR 5113.12 – District school attendance review board
- ▶ BP/E 5146.6 – Parent/Guardian notifications

Additional resources

CSBA webpage on chronic absence

CSBA's chronic absence webpage contains additional resources from Attendance Works, CSBA, and the CDE for board members to evaluate and address absenteeism in their district.

Supporting school attendance – *California School News* – September 2022:

This newsletter article includes an interview with Attendance Works Executive Director Hedy Chang and additional information on chronic absenteeism, as well as resources and tips on intervention.

CSBA blog posts on chronic absenteeism

This is a direct link to [CSBA blog posts on chronic absence](#). The blog is regularly updated with the latest information on a broad spectrum of educational topics.

Connecting to curb chronic absenteeism – *California Schools magazine* – spring 2023

This feature article speaks to experts about addressing chronic absence and shares examples from districts that are making strides in addressing the issue.

Attendance Works resources

Attendance Works provides extensive resources on many dimensions of student attendance in K-12 education. Resources, such as videos, articles, handouts for families, and toolkits are focused around positive engagement, actionable data, and capacity building.

California School Dashboard

The California School Dashboard includes an indicator evaluating chronic absences for individual districts using five performance levels, from “very low” to “very high.” Governance team members can use the Dashboard to see chronic absence levels for grades K-8 in their districts.

DataQuest

DataQuest is another useful tool from CDE to easily view district-level information in an understandable way. This site allows users to access a wide variety of data including attendance data for many student groups and for grades K-12.



Endnotes

- 1 Balfanz, Robert & Byrnes, Vaughan. (2012). *The importance of being in school: A report on absenteeism in the nation's public schools*. Johns Hopkins University, Center for Social Organization of Schools.
- 2 Gottfried, Michael A. (2014). Chronic absenteeism and its effects on students' academic and socioemotional outcomes. *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk*. 19, no.2.
- 3 Gottfried, Michael A. & Ansari, Anya. (2021). Detailing new dangers: Linking kindergarten chronic absenteeism to long-term declines in executive functioning. *The Elementary School Journal*. 121, no. 3.
- 4 Chang, H. & Romero, M. (2008). *Present, engaged, and accounted for: The critical importance of addressing chronic absence in the early grades*. National Center for Children in Poverty.
- 5 See endnote 3.
- 6 Lafortune, J. & Prunty, E. (2023). *Public school enrollment declines vary across grade levels*. Public Policy Institute of California.
- 7 California Department of Education, DataQuest. 2022-2023 Chronic absenteeism rate by ethnicity. <https://dq.cde.ca.gov/dataquest/DQCensus/AttChrAbsRate.aspx?aggllevel=State&cds=00&ear=2022-23>.
- 8 See endnote 7.

Hedy Nai-Lin Chang is the founder, Executive Director and President of Attendance Works, a national and state level initiative aimed at advancing student success by addressing chronic absence.

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