Chronic Absenteeism

As part of our Educational Vision, DESE is committed to providing every Massachusetts student a joyful, healthy, and supportive learning environment. Reducing chronic absenteeism is a key metric for success.

Snapshot

In 2023-2024, 19.7% of our students were chronically absent, compared to our pandemic high of 27.7% and pre-pandemic rate of 13%.

Nearly 1 in 5 Massachusetts students were chronically absent in 2023-2024.

More districts and schools are impacted. Districts with 10%+ chronically absent students:
- 2023-2024: 326 districts, 1391 schools
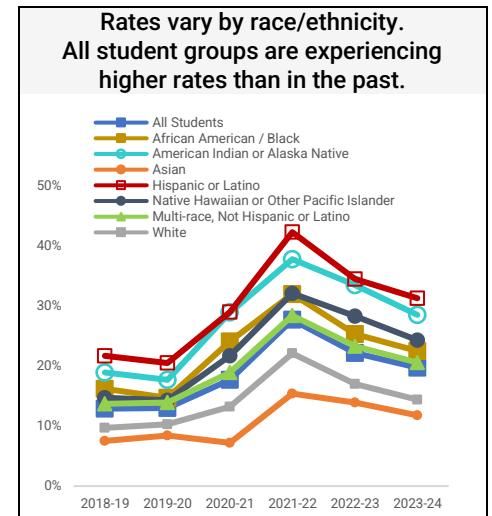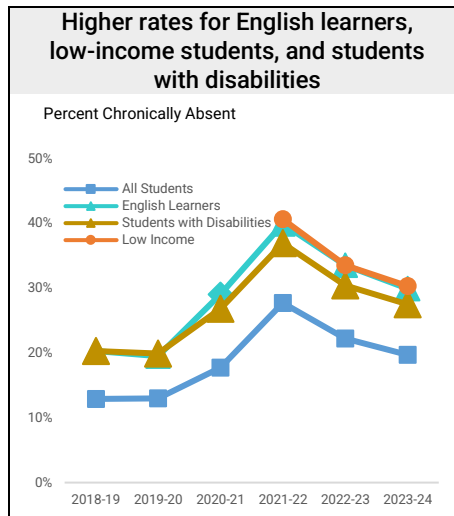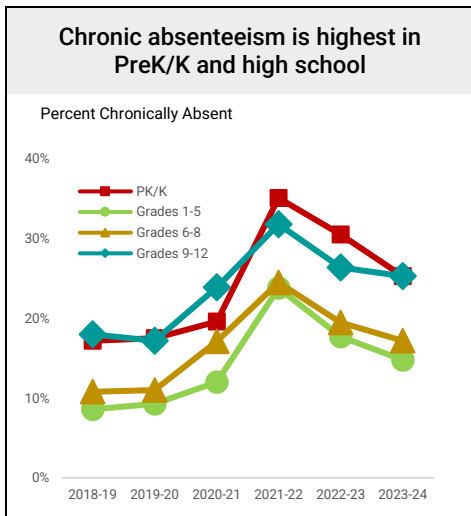- 2018-2019: 198 districts, 913 schools

Chronic absenteeism is more widespread demographically.

A Closer Look at Massachusetts Trends

Chronic absenteeism is highest in PreK/K and high school

Percent Chronically Absent

Legend: PK/K, Grades 1-5, Grades 6-8, Grades 9-12

Higher rates for English learners, low-income students, and students with disabilities

Percent Chronically Absent

Legend: All Students, English Learners, Students with Disabilities, Low Income

Rates vary by race/ethnicity. All student groups are experiencing higher rates than in the past.

Legend: All Students, African American / Black, American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian, Hispanic or Latino, Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, Multi-race, Not Hispanic or Latino, White

MCAS success rates cut in half

ELA: Percent Meeting or Exceeding 2024

	Not Chronically Absent	Chronically Absent	Difference
Grades 3-8	42	22	-20
Grade 10	63	36	-27

Math: Percent Meeting or Exceeding 2024

	Not Chronically Absent	Chronically Absent	Difference
Grades 3-8	45	19	-26
Grade 10	55	22	-33

Significantly lower graduation rate
4-Year Graduation Rate 2023

93% Not chronically absent in Grade 10

62% Chronically absent in Grade 10

Important Insights from Research

- Students in classrooms with high chronic absence feel a spillover effect, for example, lower test scores.
- Chronically absent kindergarteners have lower attendance and lower achievement in future grades.
- More than half of students who drop out were chronically absent 3 years prior.
- The negative effects of school absences are larger for low-performing, low-income, and English learner students.
- Chronic absence can cause educators to view students more negatively, fueling a negative cycle.
- The strength of a school's family engagement is more predictive of chronic absenteeism than rates of poverty -- in fact, twice as predictive post-pandemic.

Factors Contributing to Chronic Absenteeism

National research cites familiar root causes and risk factors, along with new or intensified post-pandemic variables.

Health and Mental Health

Transportation Challenges

School Aversion / Student Experience

Economic and Housing Instability

Absence and Attendance Misconceptions

New or Intensified Post Pandemic Variables
- Rise in youth mental health challenges
- Shifting caregiver/parent and student attitudes (e.g., lower threshold for missing school, more protective, more family members working remotely)
- Economic stressors
- Other variables we still need to understand?

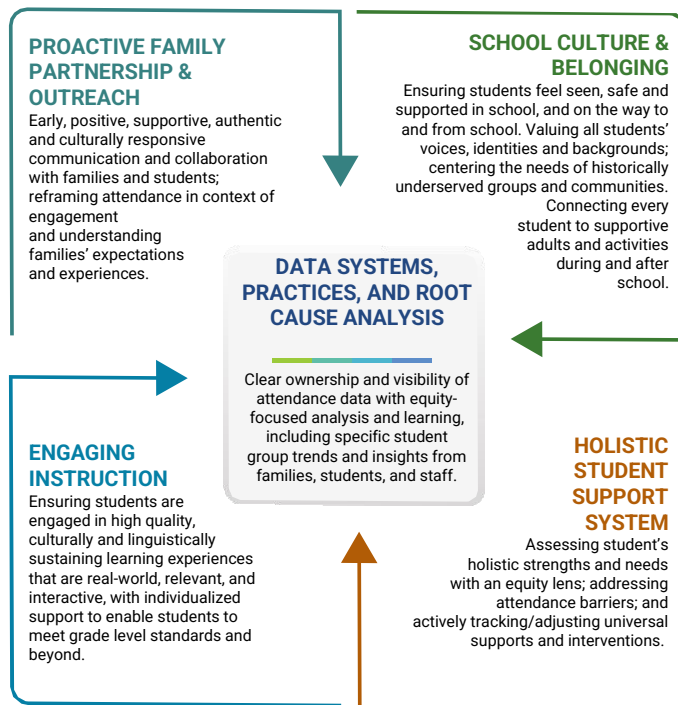# What We Can Do: Learning from Research and the Field

Chronic absenteeism is complex. It involves external and internal school factors and often requires a multipronged approach.

Nationally, the most common district strategies for addressing chronic absenteeism are:
- Use of positive and negative incentives, e.g., attendance recognition programs, detention/ suspension
- Strategies that address basic needs and transportation barriers (e.g., free breakfast, laundry money, late bus or van pick-up).

Some approaches that may have worked in the past may not address the nature and scale of the current challenge.

Approaches that prioritize these five areas are finding success:

PROACTIVE FAMILY PARTNERSHIP & OUTREACH
Early, positive, supportive, authentic and culturally responsive communication and collaboration with families and students; reframing attendance in context of engagement and understanding families' expectations and experiences.

SCHOOL CULTURE & BELONGING
Ensuring students feel seen, safe and supported in school, and on the way to and from school. Valuing all students' voices, identities and backgrounds; centering the needs of historically underserved groups and communities. Connecting every student to supportive adults and activities during and after school.

DATA SYSTEMS, PRACTICES, AND ROOT CAUSE ANALYSIS
Clear ownership and visibility of attendance data with equity-focused analysis and learning, including specific student group trends and insights from families, students, and staff.

ENGAGING INSTRUCTION
Ensuring students are engaged in high quality, culturally and linguistically sustaining learning experiences that are real-world, relevant, and interactive, with individualized support to enable students to meet grade level standards and beyond.

HOLISTIC STUDENT SUPPORT SYSTEM
Assessing student's holistic strengths and needs with an equity lens; addressing attendance barriers; and actively tracking/adjusting universal supports and interventions.

District Examples

- Disaggregated data dives by student group, grade level, week / weekday, reason for absence, number absences
- More specialized outreach and strategy effectiveness learning based on crunching data
- Broadening responsibility for data review; unified student success team
- Early communication with family -- getting ahead of compliance communications, e.g., texting to check in after 5 days, home and Zoom visits, regular attendance updates, nudge messages, attendance phone banking, calls home as attendance improves
- Equipping teachers with simple check-in scripts ("how are things going?")
- Targeted outreach to students at high risk for absenteeism to include in school welcome, orientation, and transition year activities
- Citywide attendance coalitions and campaigns (mayor robocalls, business perks for attendance, pediatrician partnerships)
- Purposeful relationship-building (Check In/Check Out, "2 x 10")
- Scheduling popular activities, speakers around days and weekends most associated with high absenteeism
- Flexible scheduling, pathways or programs for students with jobs, family care responsibilities, parenting youth
- In-school mentor/coach or mentoring from older students
- High School Transition Team
- Engaging every 9th grader in at least 2 extracurricular activities
- Lunch basketball club or lunch with a trusted adult
- Family breakfasts and cafes to discuss barriers and supports
- Helping families coordinate transportation and childcare
- Working with community partners to address barriers (rides, wake up calls, laundry money, housing help, mental health services)
- Reviewing curriculum to better leverage student identities
- Ensuring all students have access to grade level / challenging content

What DESE is Working On

- Gathering information about what's working and not, particularly in a post-pandemic landscape
- Learning about collective barriers we could help mitigate
- Looking at ways we can align and leverage DESE support to have an impact in this area

References

- Addressing chronic absence - attendance works. (2019, June 4). Attendance Works.
- Baker, C. P. (2023, October 31). 3 Tips to Combat Chronic Absenteeism (Downloadable). Education Week.
- Balfanz, R. (2024). Meeting the Chronic Absence Challenge: What Do We Know? Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, Everyone Graduates Center and the Grad Partnership.
- Carrillo, S. (2024, June 10). With "chronic absenteeism" soaring in schools, most parents aren't sure what it is. NPR.
- Chronic absenteeism is up across the country. School leaders are trying to address why. (2024, January 17). PBS News.
- Gecker, J., Toness, B. V., & Lurye, S. (2024, August 17). Millions of kids are still skipping class. Some schools offer attendance incentives | AP News. AP News.
- Cineas, F. (2024, January 9). Why so many kids are still missing school. Vox.
- Gottfried, M., Kim, P., & Fletcher, T. L. (2024). Do Teachers Perceive Absent Students Differently? AERA Open, 10.
- Gottfried, M., Page, L., & Edwards, D. (2022). District Strategies to Reduce Student Absenteeism. Brief No. 22. EdResearch for Recovery Project.
- McCardle, Elaine. Um. . . where is everybody? (2024, May 8). Harvard Graduate School of Education.
- Misha, A. (2024, March 4). Understanding and addressing the surge of chronic absenteeism. EdSurge.
- Peetz, C. (2023, October 31). 3 steps to drive down chronic absenteeism. Education Week.
- Reducing chronic absenteeism in our schools. Massachusetts Education-to-Career Research and Data Hub
- District Presentations: Agawam, Chelsea, Lowell, Salem