

# Chronic Absenteeism in K-12 Education Pre- and Post-COVID-19 Shutdowns

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During the 2015-2016 academic year, the US Department of Education identified 7.3 million students as chronically absent, meaning that 16% of the student population, or approximately one in six students, were categorized as being at higher risk of not learning and dropping out of school.

Generally, a student is deemed [chronically absent](#) if they miss at least three weeks of school within the current academic year. This absence equates to the student misses at least 10% of enrolled instructional days. With around 180 school days in a year, it would mean that a student is marked as chronically absent if they miss two school days per month.

Five years later, during the 2021-2022 academic year, the number nearly doubled, with at least 14.7 million students marked as chronically absent, coinciding with students returning to in-person learning after the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic. When schools prepared to reopen their doors, educators expected students would be eager to return to “normal” and be among their peers. Therefore, it was a shock when millions of students did not show up.

## What Happened and Why Are Students Not Returning to School?

There are several reasons why students are not returning to school. For one, many students are still struggling to transition from at-home instructional learning to being in a classroom with their peers and managing a full academic and social schedule. Parents have also expressed concerns about the post-pandemic effects. Some are afraid to send their children to school for fear that their child may contract COVID-19 or spread their sickness to other students, causing those parents to keep their children at home until they deem it safe to return.

When students hit the mark of being chronically absent, they are at higher risk of falling behind among their peers. Studies have shown that chronic absence is a strong predictor of corresponding issues, from learning loss and decline in enrollment to negative impacts on student behavior. Subsequently, these students are likely to be suspended for missing school and eventually drop out

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because they find no purpose in continuing their education.

Punitive approaches to prevention and solving chronic absenteeism do not always work and some consider them to be the wrong approach. In many jurisdictions, the current practice is for schools to either suspend or give them out-of-school detention when they are absent. In a study conducted by the American Institutes of Research, results have shown that removing students through suspension and expulsion backfired for educators who hoped to improve student learning and get at-risk students back on track. The analysis found that out-of-school suspensions hurt students' academic performance in both the short and long term, inadvertently increasing chronic absenteeism.

## **What Is the Solution and How Do We Move Forward From Here?**

Instead of punishing students for missing school, some jurisdictions are focusing on re-engaging students to foster a desire to return. Several states have taken a different approach to bettering student lives, moving away from punitive approaches. These include:

### **Trauma-Informed Approaches and Initiatives**

Trauma-informed schools have emerged across the nation. Studies have shown when schools include trauma-sensitivity initiatives, students improve both academically and cognitively. Nationwide, schools have started to incorporate trauma-sensitivity approaches in the classroom by conducting a temperature check of their students. For example, before the start of class, teachers will ask students to express how they feel by raising a colored card indicating a corresponding emotion — blue for sad or tired, yellow for anxious or excited, red for angry, or green for happy. By gauging each student's emotions at the start of class, the teacher is immediately aware of the student's current state and can provide the necessary support to help the student (i.e., creating an individualized student outreach plan). This also gives students an opportunity to communicate with their teacher without the anxiety or pressure of stepping outside their comfort zone. Establishing a stronger teacher-student relationship through trauma-sensitivity approaches can help students have better experiences at school and feel encouraged to return.

### **Hiring Licensed Nurses in Schools**

States such as New Mexico are leading the way in combatting chronic absenteeism. New Mexico Public Schools have hired licensed nurses in a creative effort to address this issue. According to the National Association of School Nurses (NASN), research shows that the presence of school nurses is associated with reduced absenteeism and missed class time. Additionally, school nurses can provide guidance on student health, contributing critical health perspectives to the development of individualized attendance intervention plans, school programs, restorative practices, and equitable policies that address the issue.

### **School-Based Mental Health Programs**

Addressing students' mental health can also play a crucial role in reducing chronic absenteeism. Schools that have integrated mental health support services through universal prevention-oriented approaches that reinforce positive behavioral skills have seen significant improvements in student behavior and academic achievement. An evaluation conducted by Positive Action, a social-emotional character development program in several schools, showed a reduction in student chronic absenteeism as one of the outcomes. By investing in and implementing mental health services in schools, we can reduce chronic absence and promote student success while supporting their well-

being.

## **Policy Implications and Government Action**

In 2015, President Barack Obama signed the “Every Student Succeeds Act” into law, requiring states to report chronic absenteeism rates for schools and giving school districts the authority to spend federal dollars on training to reduce student absenteeism. For a time, it worked. From 2016 to 2020, there was a gradual decrease in overall student absenteeism. However, post-pandemic, the number climbed right back up, doubling — putting chronic absenteeism at an all-time high.

On May 15, the Biden-Harris Administration announced new actions and resources to increase student attendance as part of the White House “Every Day Counts” Summit. During the summit, the Administration called on states to cultivate a “culture of attendance” and sent a clear message that “students need to be in school.” The Administration pledged to support efforts by state and local leaders in addressing chronic absenteeism by including targeted federal competitive grant programs to prioritize evidence-based approaches to support student achievement. As part of this pledge, President Joe Biden allocated \$8 billion in mandatory funding in the FY25 budget for “Academic Acceleration and Achievement Grants.” Funding was also provided through the STOP School Violence Program, partly through the Bipartisan Safer Communities Act, to improve school safety — all measures proven to increase student attendance.

Investing in student achievement and incorporating different techniques, such as trauma-informed initiatives, provides jurisdictions with a more effective alternative to addressing chronic absenteeism while increasing student success. There is no one-size-fits-all solution, but there are proven strategies that have consistently improved attendance numbers across the country.

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