

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%.



More districts and schools are impacted. Districts with 10%+ chronically absent students:

- 2023-2024: 326 districts, 1391 schools
- 2018-2019: 198 districts, 913 schools

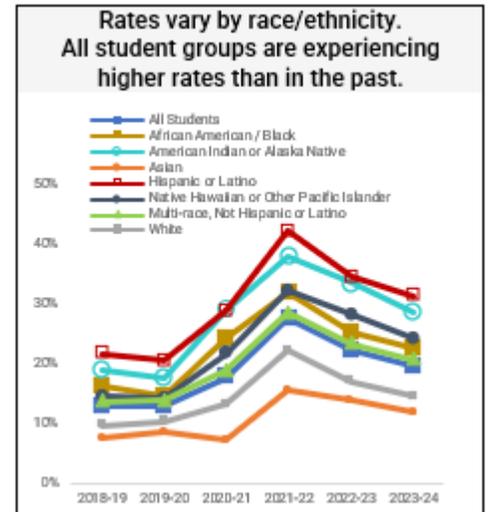
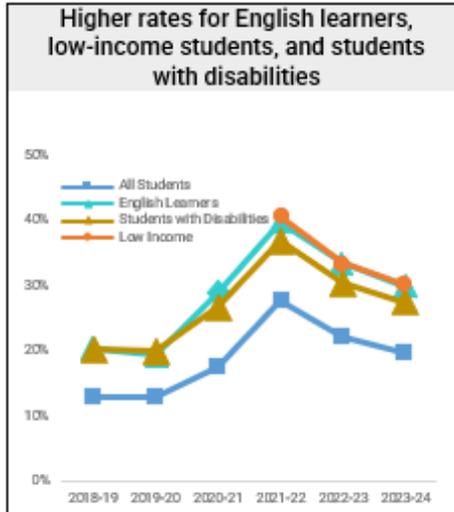
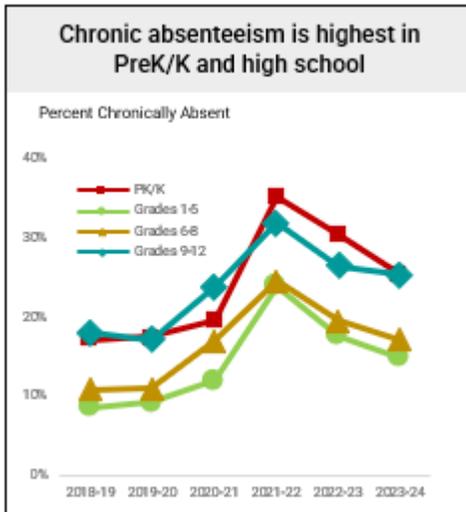


Nearly 1 in 5 Massachusetts students were chronically absent in 2023-2024.



Chronic absenteeism is more widespread demographically.

A Closer Look at Massachusetts Trends



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

Significantly lower graduation rate

4-Year Graduation Rate (class of 2024)



78%

Chronically absent in Grade 10



96%

Not 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.



What We Can Do: Learning from Research and the Field

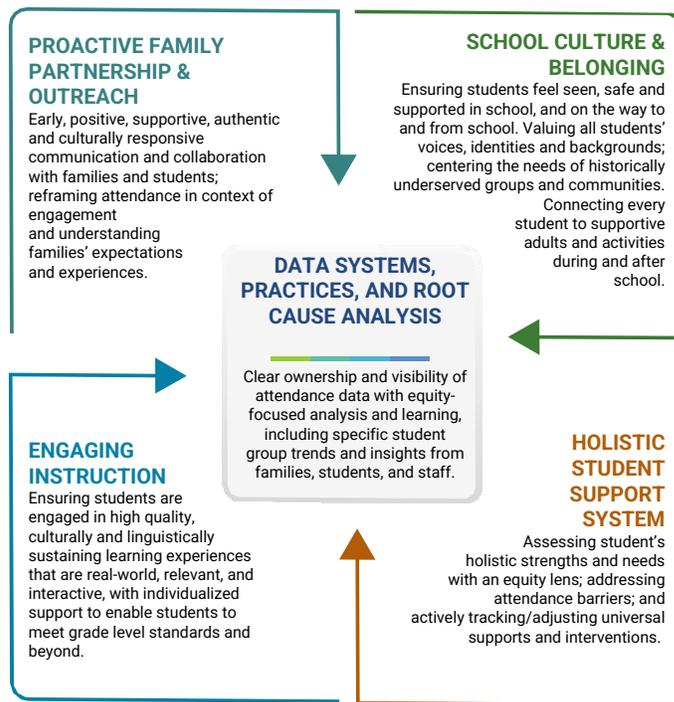
Chronic absenteeism is complex. It involves external and internal school factors and often requires a multipronged approach.

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:



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

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