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Students are missing a lot
more school. Why chronic
absenteeism may be here to
stay

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LAUSD Supt. Alberto Carvalho, right, exits an electric school bus with teachers and community members while making home visits to boost attendance ahead of the new school year. (Genaro Molina/Los Angeles Times)

By Jill Barshay

Aug. 26, 2025 3 AM PT

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- Widespread absenteeism is a problem nationwide.
- Chronic absenteeism is more than far higher than it used to be, a profound change for schools since before the pandemic.
- Several researchers suggest that cultural shifts about the importance of in-person anything may be one factor.

Five years after the start of the pandemic, one of the most surprising ways that school has profoundly, and perhaps permanently, changed is that students aren't showing up. A recent symposium at the American Enterprise Institute, where scholars shared research on the problem of widespread absenteeism, offered insights into the nationwide issue. Here are the key takeaways:

1. Chronic absenteeism has decreased from its peak in 2021-22, but it's still 50% higher than before the pandemic.

Roughly speaking, the chronic absenteeism rate nearly doubled after the pandemic, from 15% of students in 2018-19 to a peak of almost 29% in 2021-22. This is the share of students who are missing at least 10%, or 18 or more days, of school a year. Chronic absenteeism has dropped by about 2 to 3 percentage points a year since then, but was still at 23.5% 2023-24, according to the most recent AEI data.

Chronic absenteeism is more than 50% higher than it used to be. There are about 48 million public school students, from kindergarten through 12th grade. Almost 1 in 4 of them, or 11 million students, are missing a lot of school.

2. High-income students and high achievers are also skipping school.

Absenteeism cuts across economic lines. Students from both low- and high-income families are often absent as are high-achieving students. Rates are the highest among students in low-income districts, where 30% of students are chronically absent, according to AEI data.

But even in low-poverty districts, the chronic absenteeism rate has jumped more than 50% from about 10% of students to more than 15%. Similarly, more than 15% of students in the highest-achieving school districts, the top third, are chronically absent, up from 10% in pre-pandemic years.

“Chronic absenteeism affects disadvantaged students more often, but the rise in chronic absenteeism was an unfortunate tide where all boats rose,” said Nat Malkus, deputy director of education policy studies at AEI.

The data show large differences by race and ethnicity, with 36% of Black students, 33% of Latino students, 22% of white students and 15% of Asian students chronically absent. But researchers said once they controlled for income, the racial differences were not so large. In other words, chronic absenteeism rates among Black and white students of the same income are not so disparate.

3. Moderate absenteeism is increasing.

Everyone is missing more school. Jacob Kirksey, an associate professor of education policy at Texas Tech University, tracked 8 million students in three states (Texas, North Carolina and Virginia) from 2017 to 2023.

Half had “very good” absentee rates under 4% in 2019. By 2023, only a third of students were still going to school as regularly. Two-thirds were not.

“A lot of students who used to miss no school are now missing a couple days,” said Ethan Hutt, an associate professor at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, who noticed the same phenomenon in the North Carolina data that he studied. “That’s just become the norm.”

4. Many students say they skip because school is ‘boring.’

Researchers are interviewing students and families to try to understand why so many kids are skipping school.

Kevin Gee, a professor of education at UC Davis analyzed surveys of elementary, middle and high school students in Rhode Island from 2016 to

2024. He found that more students are reporting missing school for traditionally common reasons: not getting enough sleep and illness.

After the pandemic, parents are more likely to keep their kids home from school when they get sick, but that doesn't explain why absenteeism is this high or why physically healthy kids are also missing so much school.

Gee found two notable post-pandemic differences among students in Rhode Island. Unfinished homework is less of a reason to skip school today than it used to be, while more elementary school students said they skipped school because "it's boring."

Researchers at the symposium debated what to do about school being boring. Some thought school lessons need to be more engaging for students who may have shorter attention spans. But others disagreed.

"I think it's OK for school to be boring," said Liz Cohen, a research fellow at the Johns Hopkins Institute for Education Policy. "We need to adjust expectations that school should be as exciting as 'Dora the Explorer' all the time."

5. Mental health issues contribute to absenteeism.

Morgan Polikoff, a professor of education at the University of Southern California, has also analyzed surveys and noticed a “strong connection” between mental health struggles and chronic absenteeism. It was unclear if the increase in mental illness was triggered or exacerbated by the pandemic, or if it reflects anxiety and depression issues that began before the pandemic.

He’s interviewing families and teenagers about why they’re absent, and he says he’s seeing high levels of “disengagement” and mental illness. Parents, he said, were often very concerned about their children’s mental health and well-being.

“A lot of these kids have really severe traumas,” he said. “Lots of very legitimate reasons for missing school. Really chronic disengagement. The school is not serving them well.”

6. Showing up has become optional.

Several researchers suggested that there have been profound cultural shifts in the importance of in-person anything.

Seth Gershenson, an economist and associate professor of public affairs at American University, suggested that in-person school may seem optional to students in the same way that going to the office feels optional for adults.

“Social norms about in-person attendance have changed, whether it’s meeting with the doctor or whatever,” said Gershenson. “We’re going to be absent now for reasons that would not have caused us to be absent in the past.”

At the same time, technology has made it easier for students to skip school and make up the work.

In Polikoff’s interviews, 39 of the 40 families said it was “easy” to make up for being absent.

“People like that everything is available online and convenient,” he said. “And also, there is absolutely no question in my mind that doing that — which is well-intentioned — makes it much easier for people to be absent.”

The numbers back that up. Gershenson calculated that before the pandemic, skipping 10 days of school caused a student to lose the equivalent of a month’s worth of learning. Now, the learning loss from this amount of absenteeism is about 10% less; instead of losing a month of school, it’s like losing 90% of a month.

Gershenson said that’s still big enough to matter.

And students haven’t felt the most severe consequence: failing. Indeed, even as absenteeism has surged, school grades and graduation rates have been rising. Many blame grade inflation and an effort to avoid a high school dropout epidemic.

7. Today’s absenteeism could mean labor force problems tomorrow.

Academic harm may not be the most significant consequence of today's elevated levels of chronic absenteeism. Indeed, researchers calculated that returning to pre-pandemic levels of chronic absenteeism would erase only 7.5% of the nation's pandemic learning losses. There are other more profound (and little understood) reasons why students are so far behind.

More importantly, the experience of attending school regularly doesn't just improve academic performance, researchers say. It also sets up good habits for the future. "Employers value regular attendance," said Gershenson.

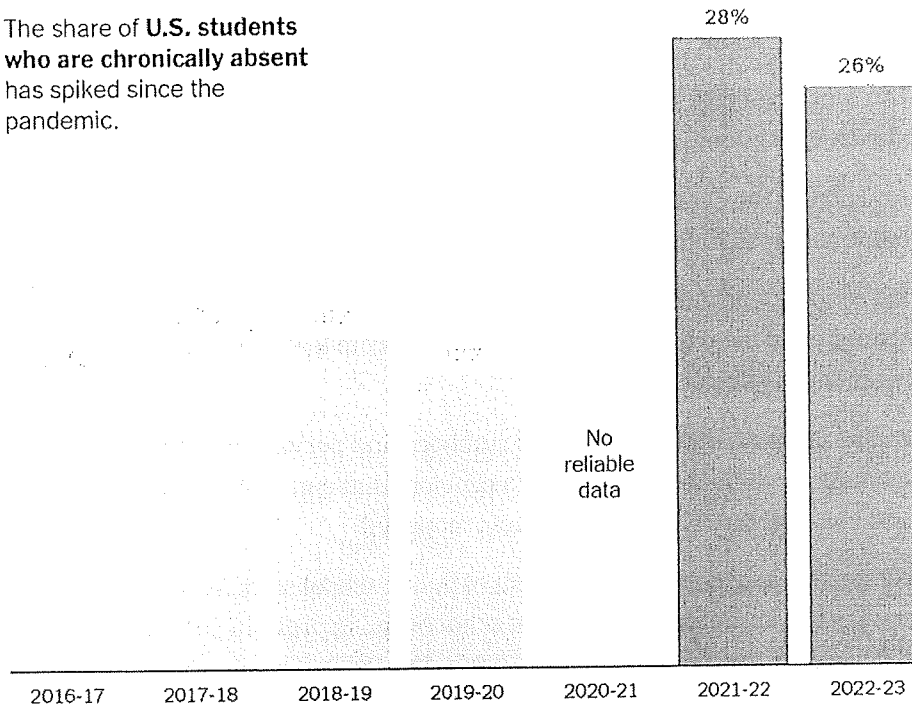
Jill Barshay writes for the Hechinger Report, a nonprofit, independent news organization focused on inequality and innovation in education.

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Why School Absences Have 'Exploded' Almost Everywhere - The New York Times

The New York Times

The share of **U.S. students who are chronically absent** has spiked since the pandemic.



Source: Nat Malkus, American Enterprise Institute. Chronic absenteeism is defined as missing 10 percent of a school year.

Why School Absences Have 'Exploded' Almost Everywhere

The pandemic changed families' lives and the culture of education: "Our relationship with school became optional."

By Sarah Mervosh and Francesca Paris

Sarah Mervosh reports on K-12 education, and Francesca Paris is a data reporter.

March 29, 2024

In Anchorage, affluent families set off on ski trips and other lengthy vacations, with the assumption that their children can keep up with schoolwork online.

In a working-class pocket of Michigan, school administrators have tried almost everything, including pajama day, to boost student attendance.

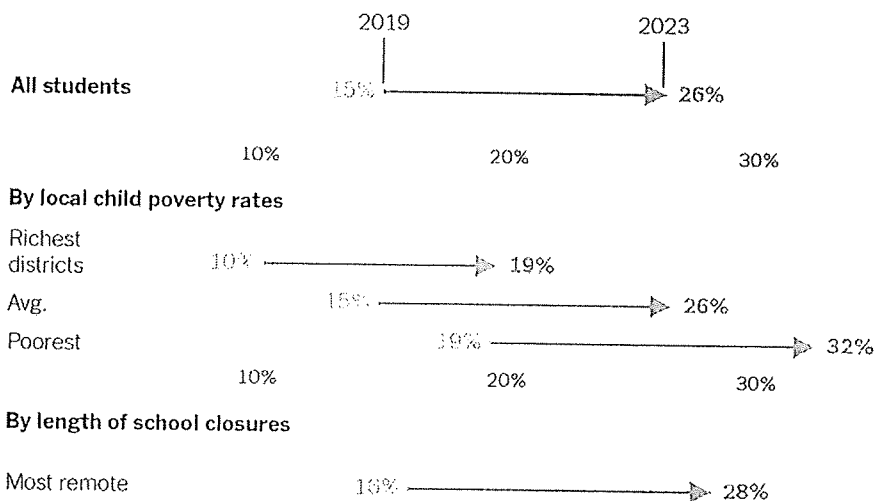
And across the country, students with heightened anxiety are opting to stay home rather than face the classroom.

In the four years since the pandemic closed schools, U.S. education has struggled to recover on a number of fronts, from learning loss, to enrollment, to student behavior.

But perhaps no issue has been as stubborn and pervasive as a sharp increase in student absenteeism, a problem that cuts across demographics and has continued long after schools reopened.

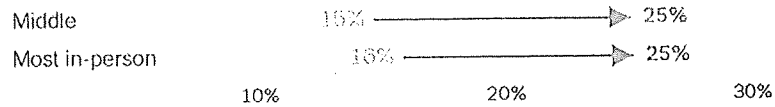
Nationally, an estimated 26 percent of public school students were considered chronically absent last school year, up from 15 percent before the pandemic, according to the most recent data, from 40 states and Washington, D.C., compiled by the conservative-leaning American Enterprise Institute. Chronic absence is typically defined as missing at least 10 percent of the school year, or about 18 days, for any reason.

Increase in chronic absenteeism, 2019–23

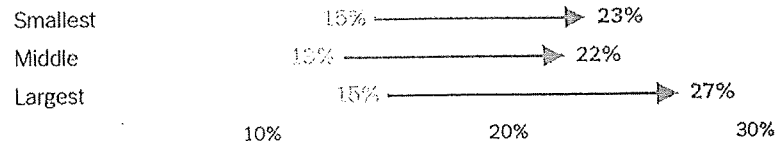


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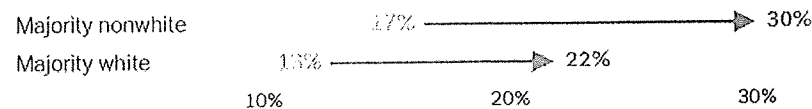
Why School Absences Have 'Exploded' Almost Everywhere - The New York Times



By school district size



By district racial makeup



Source: Upshot analysis of data from Nat Malkus, American Enterprise Institute. Districts are grouped into highest, middle and lowest third.

The increases have occurred in districts big and small, and across income and race. For districts in wealthier areas, chronic absenteeism rates have about doubled, to 19 percent in the 2022-23 school year from 10 percent before the pandemic, a New York Times analysis of the data found.

Poor communities, which started with elevated rates of student absenteeism, are facing an even bigger crisis: Around 32 percent of students in the poorest districts were chronically absent in the 2022-23 school year, up from 19 percent before the pandemic.

Even districts that reopened quickly during the pandemic, in fall 2020, have seen vast increases.

"The problem got worse for everybody in the same proportional way," said Nat Malkus, a senior fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, who collected and studied the data.



Victoria, Texas reopened schools in August 2020, earlier than many other districts. Even so, student absenteeism in the district has doubled. Kaylee Greenlee for The New York Times

The trends suggest that something fundamental has shifted in American childhood and the culture of school, in ways that may be long lasting. What was once a deeply ingrained habit — wake up, catch the bus, report to class — is now something far more tenuous.

“Our relationship with school became optional,” said Katie Rosanbalm, a psychologist and associate research professor with the Center for Child and Family Policy at Duke University.

The habit of daily attendance — and many families’ trust — was severed when schools shuttered in spring 2020. Even after schools reopened, things hardly snapped back to normal. Districts offered remote options, required Covid-19 quarantines and relaxed policies around attendance and grading.

Look up a district:

Type here to highlight a district.

Lookup includes medium and large public school districts. Data not available for Arizona, Arkansas, Minnesota, Montana, New Hampshire, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Texas, Vermont and Wyoming.

This district

10% 20% 30%

U.S. avg.

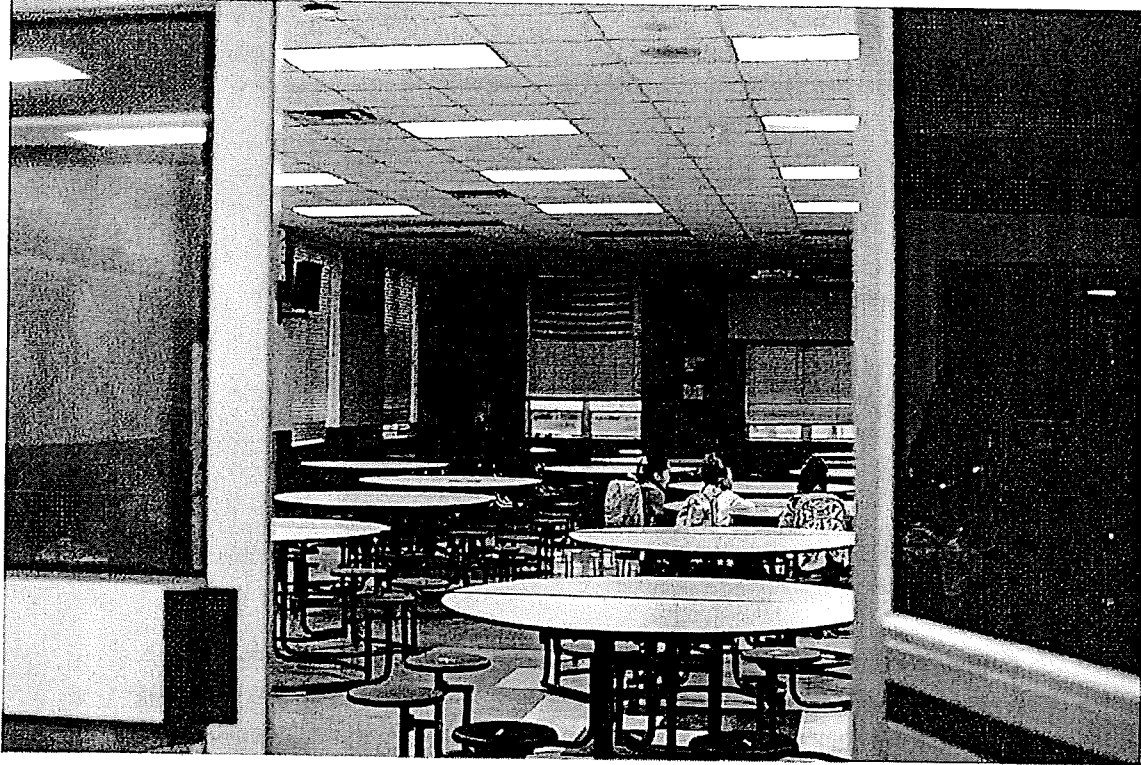
15% —————> 26%

10% 20% 30%

Source: Nat Malkus, American Enterprise Institute. Includes districts with at least 1,500 students in 2019. Numbers are rounded. U.S. average is estimated.

Today, student absenteeism is a leading factor hindering the nation's recovery from pandemic learning losses, educational experts say. Students can't learn if they aren't in school. And a rotating cast of absent classmates can negatively affect the achievement of even students who do show up, because teachers must slow down and adjust their approach to keep everyone on track.

"If we don't address the absenteeism, then all is naught," said Adam Clark, the superintendent of Mt. Diablo Unified, a socioeconomically and racially diverse district of 29,000 students in Northern California, where he said absenteeism has "exploded" to about 25 percent of students. That's up from 12 percent before the pandemic.



U.S. students, overall, are not caught up from their pandemic losses. Absenteeism is one key reason. Kaylee Greenlee for The New York Times

Why Students Are Missing School

Schools everywhere are scrambling to improve attendance, but the new calculus among families is complex and multifaceted.

At South Anchorage High School in Anchorage, where students are largely white and middle-to-upper income, some families now go on ski trips during the school year, or take advantage of off-peak travel deals to vacation for two weeks in Hawaii, said Sara Miller, a counselor at the school.

For a smaller number of students at the school who qualify for free or reduced-price lunch, the reasons are different, and more intractable. They often have to stay home to care for younger siblings, Ms. Miller said. On days they miss the bus, their parents are busy working or do not have a car to take them to school.

And because teachers are still expected to post class work online, often nothing more than a skeleton version of an assignment, families incorrectly think students are keeping up, Ms. Miller said.



Sara Miller, a counselor at South Anchorage High School for 20 years, now sees more absences from students across the socioeconomic spectrum. Ash Adams for The New York Times

Across the country, students are staying home when sick, not only with Covid-19, but also with more routine colds and viruses.

And more students are struggling with their mental health, one reason for increased absenteeism in Mason, Ohio, an affluent suburb of Cincinnati, said Tracey Carson, a district spokeswoman. Because many parents can work remotely, their children can also stay home.

For Ashley Cooper, 31, of San Marcos, Texas, the pandemic fractured her trust in an education system that she said left her daughter to learn online, with little support, and then expected her to perform on grade level upon her return. Her daughter, who fell behind in math, has struggled with anxiety ever since, she said.

Quintin Shepherd, the superintendent in Victoria, Texas, first put his focus on student behavior, which he described as a “fire in the kitchen” after schools reopened in August 2020.

The district, which serves a mostly low-income and Hispanic student body of around 13,000, found success with a one-on-one coaching program that teaches coping strategies to the most disruptive students. In some cases, students went from having 20 classroom outbursts per year to fewer than five, Dr. Shepherd said.

But chronic absenteeism is yet to be conquered. About 30 percent of students are chronically absent this year, roughly double the rate before the pandemic.

Dr. Shepherd, who originally hoped student absenteeism would improve naturally with time, has begun to think that it is, in fact, at the root of many issues.

“If kids are not here, they are not forming relationships,” he said. “If they are not forming relationships, we should expect there will be behavior and discipline issues. If they are not here, they will not be academically learning and they will struggle. If they struggle with their coursework, you can expect violent behaviors.”

Teacher absences have also increased since the pandemic, and student absences mean less certainty about which friends and classmates will be there. That can lead to more absenteeism, said Michael A. Gottfried, a professor at the University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education. His research has found that 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.



Absent classmates can have a negative impact on the achievement and attendance of even the students who do show up. Ash Adams for The New York Times

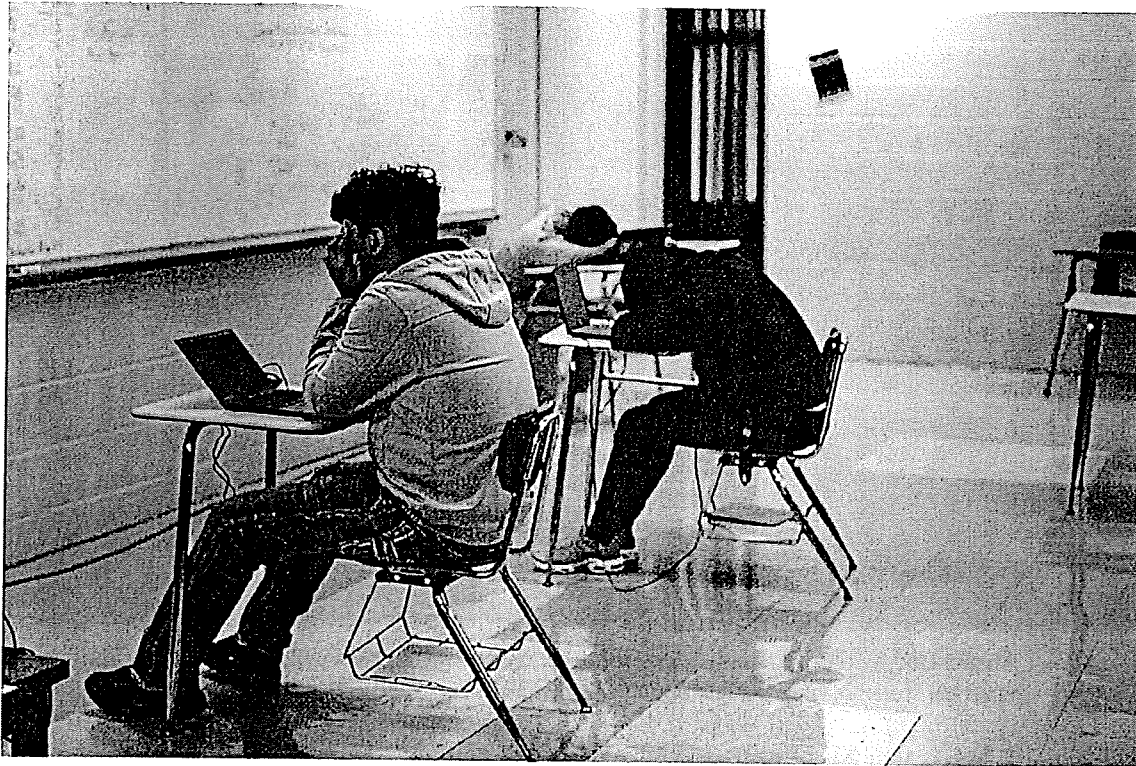
Is This the New Normal?

In many ways, the challenge facing schools is one felt more broadly in American society: Have the cultural shifts from the pandemic become permanent?

In the work force, U.S. employees are still working from home at a rate that has remained largely unchanged since late 2022. Companies have managed to "put the genie back in the bottle" to some extent by requiring a return to office a few days a week, said Nicholas Bloom, an economist at Stanford University who studies remote work. But hybrid office culture, he said, appears here to stay.

Some wonder whether it is time for schools to be more pragmatic.

Lakisha Young, the chief executive of the Oakland REACH, a parent advocacy group that works with low-income families in California, suggested a rigorous online option that students could use in emergencies, such as when a student misses the bus or has to care for a family member. "The goal should be, how do I ensure this kid is educated?" she said.



Relationships with adults at school and other classmates are crucial for attendance.
Kaylee Greenlee for The New York Times

In the corporate world, companies have found some success appealing to a sense of social responsibility, where colleagues rely on each other to show up on the agreed-upon days.

A similar dynamic may be at play in schools, where experts say strong relationships are critical for attendance.

There is a sense of: "If I don't show up, would people even miss the fact that I'm not there?" said Charlene M. Russell-Tucker, the commissioner of education in Connecticut.

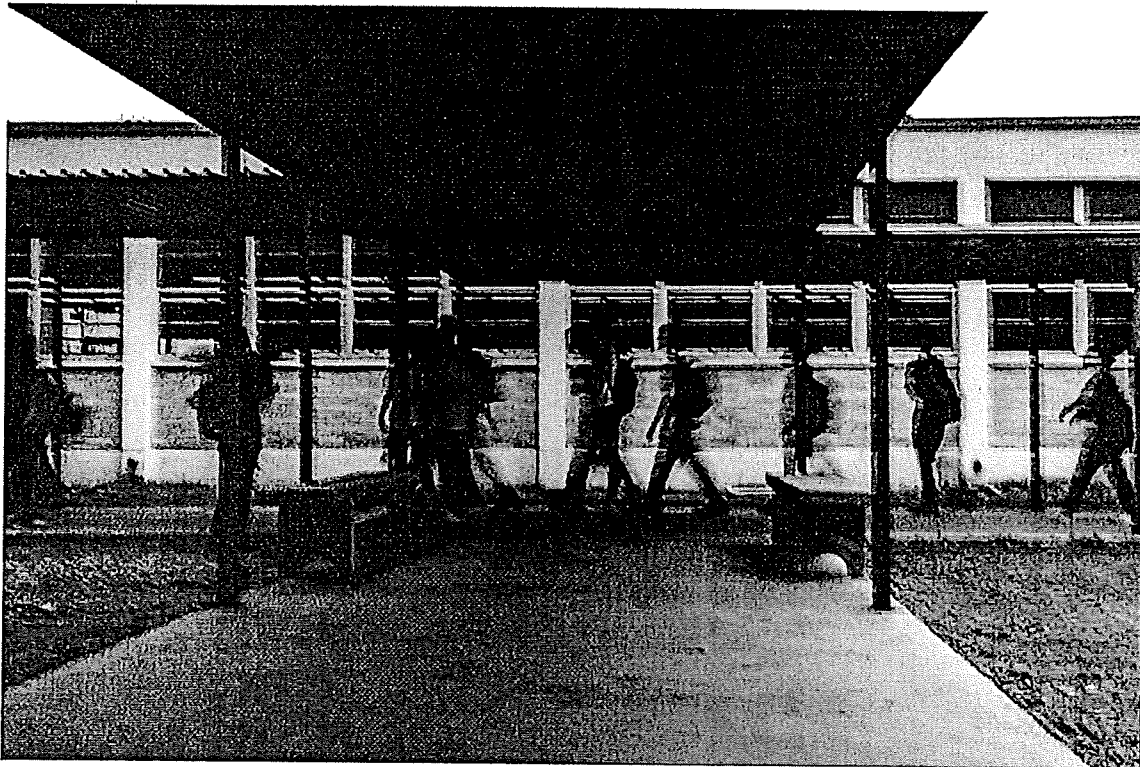
In her state, a home visit program has yielded positive results, in part by working with families to address the specific reasons a student is missing school, but also by establishing a relationship with a caring adult. Other efforts — such as sending text messages or postcards to parents informing them of the number of accumulated absences — can also be effective.

In Ypsilanti, Mich., outside of Ann Arbor, a home visit helped Regina Murff, 44, feel less alone when she was struggling to get her children to school each morning.

After working at a nursing home during the pandemic, and later losing her sister to Covid-19, she said, there were days she found it difficult to get out of bed. Ms. Murff was also more willing to keep her children home when they were sick, for fear of accidentally spreading the virus.

But after a visit from her school district, and starting therapy herself, she has settled into a new routine. She helps her sons, 6 and 12, set out their outfits at night and she wakes up at 6 a.m. to ensure they get on the bus. If they are sick, she said, she knows to call the absence into school. "I've done a huge turnaround in my life," she said.

But bringing about meaningful change for large numbers of students remains slow, difficult work.



Nationally, about 26 percent of students were considered chronically absent last school year, up from 15 percent before the pandemic. Kaylee Greenlee for The New York Times

The Ypsilanti school district has tried a bit of everything, said the superintendent, Alena Zachery-Ross. In addition to door knocks, officials are looking for ways to make school more appealing for the district's 3,800 students, including more than 80 percent who qualify for free or reduced-price lunch. They held themed dress-up days — '70s day, pajama day — and gave away warm clothes after noticing a dip in attendance during winter months.

"We wondered, is it because you don't have a coat, you don't have boots?" said Dr. Zachery-Ross.

Still, absenteeism overall remains higher than it was before the pandemic. "We haven't seen an answer," she said.

Data provided by Nat Malkus, with the American Enterprise Institute. The data was originally published on the Return to Learn tracker and used for the report "Long COVID for Public Schools: Chronic Absenteeism Before and After the Pandemic."

The analysis for each year includes all districts with available data for that year, weighted by district size. Data are sourced from states, where available, and the U.S. Department of Education and NCES Common Core of Data.

For the 2018-19 school year, data was available for all 50 states and the District of Columbia. For 2022-23, it was available for 40 states and D.C., due to delays in state reporting.

Closure length status is based on the most in-person learning option available. Poverty is measured using the Census Bureau's Small Area Income and Poverty Estimates. School size and minority population estimates are from NCES CCD.

How absenteeism is measured can vary state by state, which means comparisons across state lines may not be reliable.

Correction: March 29, 2024

An earlier version of this article misnamed a research center at Duke University. It is the Center for Child and Family Policy, not the Center of Child and Family Policy.