# What to Know about Chronic Absenteeism

Chronic absenteeism has emerged as a critical issue in US public schools, particularly in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic. Deemed the "Long-COVID" for public schools, absenteeism appears to be an unintended consequence of the pandemic and a stubborn issue to remedy (Malkus, 2024). To further highlight this issue, we provide a concise overview of national trends in chronic absenteeism, identify schools most affected, and explore the academic consequences of sustained absenteeism. The findings underscore the urgent need for targeted interventions to address educational disparities and support student engagement.

## Key Highlights

- Chronic absenteeism rates increased post-pandemic and remain high. A majority of schools have **high or extreme** rates of absenteeism.
- Absenteeism is higher in **lower-income** schools and particularly high for schools serving **students of color** in **urban settings**.
- Schools with higher rates of absenteeism show **lower test scores** over time.

## Introduction

Chronic absenteeism—typically defined as missing 10% or more of school days in a year—has long been a concern for educators and policymakers. However, the problem has intensified in recent years, particularly following the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Given the longstanding shifts to academic achievement resulting from these disruptions (Curriculum Associates, 2023; 2024; Young & Young, 2024; Lewis & Kuhfeld, 2023; US Department of Education, 2023), increased rates of absenteeism may be exacerbating the issue and creating enormous barriers for recovery efforts (Reardon et al., 2025; NCES, 2023).

## Methods

To demonstrate current trends in absenteeism, we utilized school-level Chronic Absenteeism data reported by Ed Data Express (US Department of Education, 2023) and student-level academic performance on the *i-Ready Diagnostic*. These data were used for three sets of analyses. First, we reported chronic absenteeism rates by school, calculating the proportion of schools demonstrating low to extreme rates of absenteeism by year. Second, we showed rates of chronic absenteeism—the proportion of students in a school who are chronically absent—by school characteristics, including median income, locale, and demographic makeup.

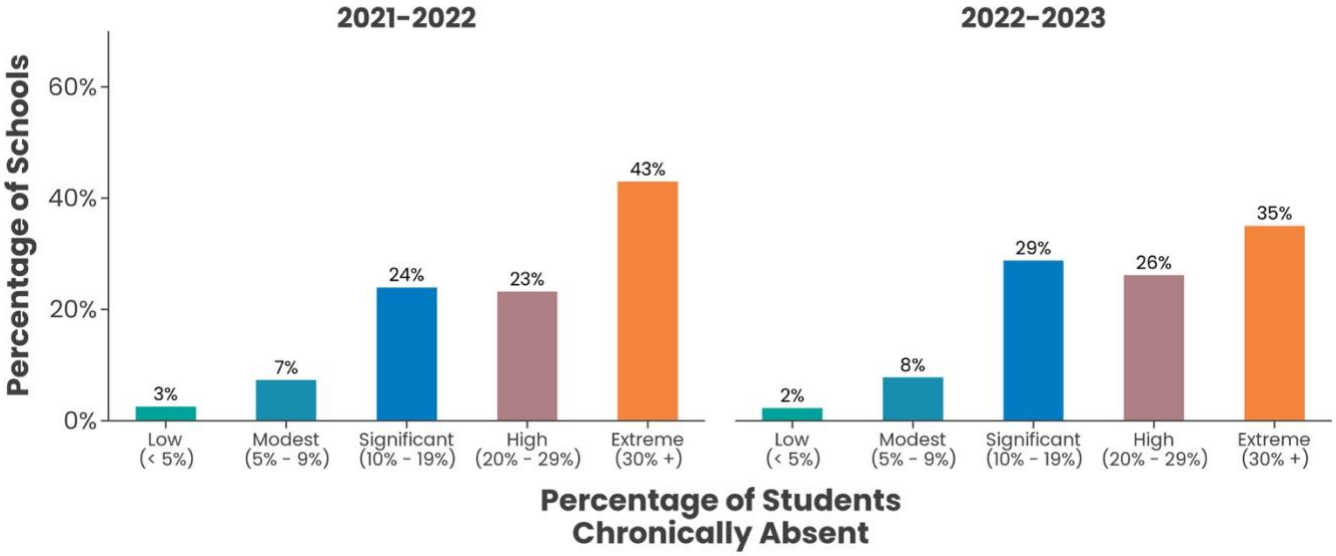
For our last analysis, we conducted piecewise growth modeling to evaluate the effect of school-level absenteeism rate (averaged across two years) on academic growth over time. Each model fit two slopes (one per academic year) to each student to calculate growth over time. We used linear and quadratic terms for each slope to more closely fit the nonlinear learning within and across academic years. To account for nested

data (i.e., students nested in time and school), we included random intercepts for students and schools. School-level demographic factors, including race/ethnicity and median income, were added as main effects to account for their possible confounding influence. It is important to note the difference in the level of observation across variables. Though school-level absenteeism rates offer some insight to the association between missed school and academic achievement, it is a coarse measure that may diminish patterns at the student level.

## Rates of Absenteeism

Recent data reveal a sharp increase in chronic absenteeism across US schools (US Department of Education, 2023). Though absenteeism was already a concern prior to the pandemic, the shift to remote learning, health-related anxieties, and broader social disruptions have exacerbated the issue (Dee, 2025; Malkus, 2024; Saavedra et al., 2024). A majority of schools now report either high or extreme levels of absenteeism, indicating that this is not a localized problem but a widespread national challenge (Figure 1). These rates have doubled since 2018–2019, during which only approximately 28% of schools experienced these high rates of absenteeism.

### Figure 1. Percentage of US Schools Demonstrating Low to Extreme Rates of Absenteeism by Year




## Schools Most Affected

While the increase to absenteeism appears to be a national challenge, data demonstrate the disproportionality in schools most affected (Figure 2). Schools serving predominantly low-income communities and students of color—especially those located in urban areas—are experiencing the highest rates. These schools often face systemic challenges such as underfunding, limited access to healthcare, and higher community stress levels, all of which contribute to higher absenteeism (Attendance Works & Healthy Schools Campaign, 2015). The data suggest that chronic absenteeism is both a symptom and a driver of educational disparity.

## Figure 2. Percentage of Students Chronically Absent by School Demographics

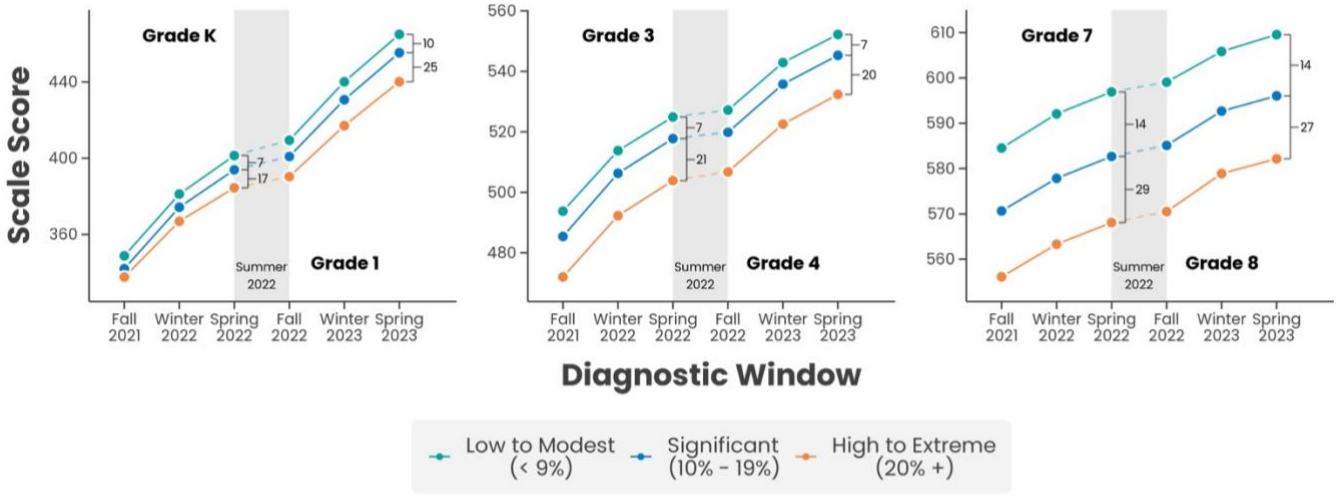

Note: Values represent the count of schools in the sample who meet those characteristics.

## Absenteeism and Academic Growth

There is a clear and troubling link between absenteeism and academic performance. Schools with higher rates of chronic absenteeism consistently show lower test scores over time (Figure 3; 4). This trend holds across grade levels and subjects, suggesting that absenteeism disrupts learning continuity and undermines student achievement.

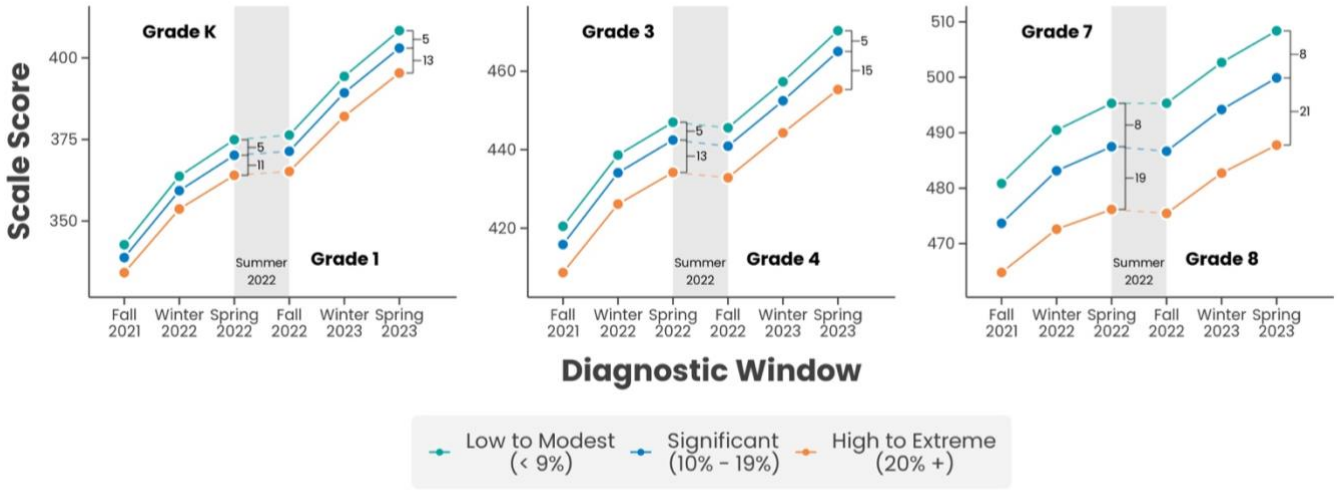
The cumulative effect of missed instructional time can have long-term consequences for students' educational trajectories and life outcomes. Early and sustained chronic absenteeism can place students on a challenging academic path, potentially falling behind academically, struggling to develop needed social skills for school success, and eventually being at higher risk of dropout (Gottfried, 2014; Schoeneberger, 2012).

### Figure 3. Student Growth in Reading across Two Years by School Absenteeism Rates




Numeric values represent the difference in spring scores between low-to-modest rates of absenteeism and significant or high-to-extreme rates of absenteesim.

### Figure 4. Student Growth in Mathematics across Two Years by School Absenteeism Rates




Numeric values represent the difference in spring scores between low-to-modest rates of absenteeism and significant or high-to-extreme rates of absenteesim.

## Conclusion

Chronic absenteeism is a pressing national issue with far-reaching implications for educational disparities and student success. The data highlight the need for systemic interventions that address both the root causes and consequences of absenteeism. These may include increased funding for high-need schools, community-based support services, and policies that promote student engagement and attendance. Future research should explore the effectiveness of specific interventions and track long-term trends to inform policy and practice.

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