

CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM PERSISTS IN ALL CORNERS OF WISCONSIN

Despite a decline from the previous year, rates of chronic absenteeism for Wisconsin's students – defined as missing more than one in ten school days for any reason – remained at historically high levels in 2023 for children of every race, grade level, and socioeconomic status. District leaders point to many causes, including lasting impacts of the pandemic. Some have made improvements through strong communication campaigns and concerted, districtwide efforts.

In the 2022-23 school year (referred to in this brief as 2023), 19.5% of Wisconsin's K-12 public school district and charter students were chronically absent. While this number represents a welcome decline from the record number of students who were chronically absent in the prior school year, it is still dramatically higher than pre-pandemic levels.

Last year, we [dived](#) into the data on chronic absenteeism in Wisconsin and found that, in 2021, chronic absenteeism rose alarmingly and was highest for districts with large shares of students of color and students from low-income households. Since that time, two more years of data have been published, showing rates even higher than in 2021. Here, we analyze these latest data in an effort to plumb not only the problem but also potential causes and solutions.

The data we use come from the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (DPI), which defines chronic absenteeism as missing at least 10% of possible attendance days, including excused absences. In most school districts, this amounts to a student missing 18 or more days of school in a year.

ISSUE AFFECTS MANY STUDENTS

Absenteeism rates remained below 13% from 2006, the first year for which we have public data, through 2020. We raised alarms when the rate ticked up to 16.1% in 2021, especially since reporting variability during the pandemic might have led to an undercount. After soaring to 22.7% statewide in 2022, the 2023 rate of 19.5% was still more than six percentage points above 2019. (DPI notes that the attendance data collection

system changed for 2017, which may have resulted in more accurately reported rates in subsequent years. DPI also issued a data errata for 2020 when not every school continued reporting attendance through the end of that school year.)

On average, students of every grade level, gender, race or ethnicity, English learner status, disability status, and level of economic disadvantage experienced these trends: All saw elevated chronic absenteeism in 2021, a further spike in 2022, and a middling recovery in 2023.

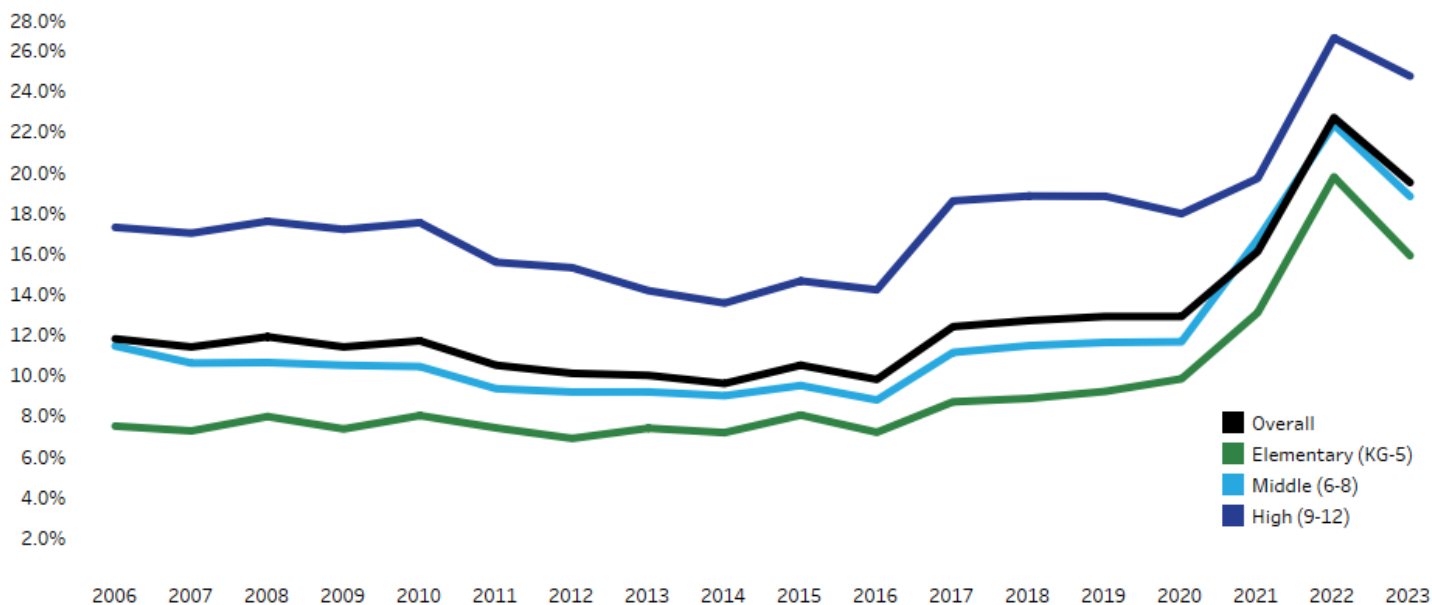
Typically, high school students have the highest levels of chronic absenteeism. This held true before, during, and after the pandemic. In 2023, more than a quarter of the state's 11th and 12th graders were chronically absent, compared to fewer than one in five students in first through seventh grade.

When it comes to *recovery*, however, students in the youngest grade levels remained the furthest above their pre-pandemic norm (see Figure 1 on following page). For example, Wisconsin's 12th graders were chronically absent at a rate of 27.6% in 2023, an increase of 3.5 percentage points over their 2019 levels. The 16.8% of first graders chronically absent in 2023, on the other hand, was a full 7.4 points above the 2019 rate even after dropping from a high of 21.1% in 2022.

Absenteeism in the youngest grades is particularly concerning since habits formed in the early years may carry through students' academic careers, setting up today's elementary school students to experience chronic absenteeism in future years at rates even higher than today's middle and high school students.

Figure 1: Chronic Absenteeism Remains Furthest Above Pre-Pandemic Norms for Elementary Students

Rates of chronic absenteeism in Wisconsin by grade level



Source: Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction

Research has tied chronic absenteeism to lower student achievement, decreased student mental health, higher dropout rates, and more challenges in adulthood.

Wisconsin students of all racial and ethnic backgrounds were chronically absent at substantially higher rates in 2023 than in 2019. The state's Black and American Indian or Alaskan Native students had the highest rates of chronic absenteeism in every year studied.

Encouragingly, these two groups – along with Hispanic students – made the largest percentage point improvements in 2023. Still, the majority of Black students were chronically absent in both 2022 (58.0%) and 2023 (51.0%), over 10 percentage points higher than any year prior to 2021.

Rates of chronic absenteeism for students classified as economically disadvantaged were nearly three times as high as their non-economically disadvantaged peers in 2023 – 31.6% compared to 11.3%. On the other hand, their rates improved more from 2022 to 2023 than rates for more affluent students, the latter of which remained almost twice as high as pre-pandemic levels.

These comparisons illustrate the degree to which post-pandemic chronic absenteeism has not spared any student group even as more vulnerable groups have missed more days of school.

ISSUE AFFECTS MANY DISTRICTS

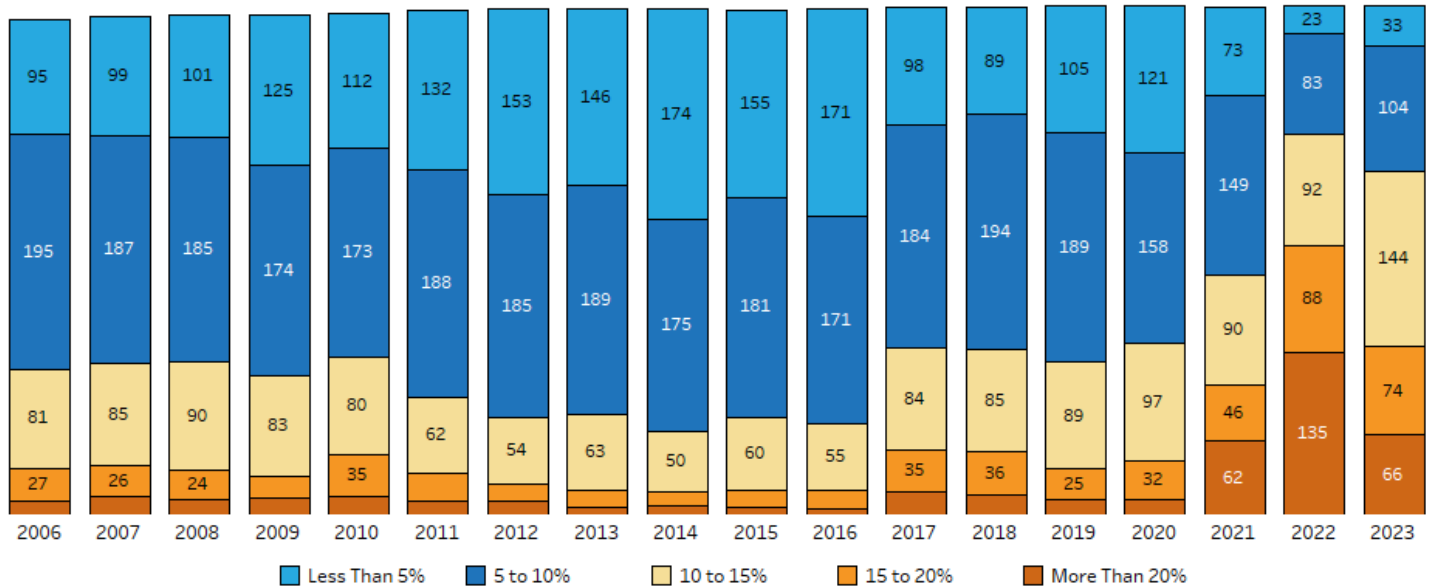
As is to be expected when chronic absenteeism has affected so many student types, very few districts avoided significant increases in the number of students who missed many days of school. In 2019, rates of chronic absenteeism were above 10% in only 127 of the state's 421 public districts (30.2%). By 2022, an overwhelming majority of districts could be categorized as such – 315 of 421, or 74.8% (see Figure 2 on following page). At least one in five students was chronically absent at nearly a third of the state's districts, compared to less than 5% of districts in every year before 2021.

Districts in cities, those with large shares of students of color, and those with large shares of economically disadvantaged students continued to report the highest rates of chronic absenteeism. In 2023, 16 districts had at least 30% of their students qualify as chronically absent. These included some large city districts such as Milwaukee, Madison, Green Bay, and Racine, and a handful of districts on or adjacent to tribal land, such as Menominee Indian, Bayfield, Lac du Flambeau #1, Ashland, and Butternut. Of these, Milwaukee Public Schools had the highest rate of chronic absenteeism in 2023 at 50.4%; no other district in the state had a rate higher than 45%.



Figure 2: Chronic Absenteeism An Issue In Most Wisconsin Districts

Number of public, non-charter districts by percentage of students chronically absent and school year



Source: Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction

CAUSES OF CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM

The issue of chronic absenteeism is not unique to Wisconsin. [Nationally](#), theories and attempted solutions abound to address the skyrocketing rates emerging from the pandemic. Worsening mental health outcomes among students may be one reason, causing students to avoid school. In the 2023 [Wisconsin Youth Risk Behavior Survey](#), for example, 13.9% of students reported that they “rarely” or “never” felt safe at school compared to 9.5% of students in 2019, and 51.6% of students reported anxiety, compared to 49.0% in 2019 and 39.9% in 2017. Parents may also be more sympathetic to their children’s mental health concerns than in the past.

District leaders we interviewed further hypothesized other causes, some of which also arise frequently in national conversations. They wondered whether families were experiencing deeper or more pervasive levels of poverty, increasing housing instability, rising costs associated with childcare, or issues with transportation. They cited cases in which a student became homeless, parents needed their child’s assistance with translation, or children did not have a way of getting to school, all of which decreased attendance.

Some possible causes seem tied to changes in the relationship between families and school since the pandemic. For one, public health guidance encouraged

everyone to stay home when sick with COVID-19. Before the pandemic, students with a cough or cold still might have come to school. Now, leaders say, these students are more likely to stay home. The increased prevalence of remote work may also make it easier for some parents to stay home with children.

Additionally, the widespread shutdown of in-person schooling during the height of COVID-19 may have undermined the broad societal understanding that children should be in school. Officials we spoke with told of parents asking if children could miss a month of school for vacation or of a student missing a week of school because their family was opening a restaurant – anecdotes they say were rare before 2020. The specific reasons behind the decreased attendance for different student groups may vary significantly, but the net effect has been eerily similar.

SOLUTIONS FOR CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM

National [data](#) show that no state has seen levels of chronic absenteeism return to where they were in 2019. However, individual districts with strong recoveries – including three we talked to in Wisconsin – suggest a variety of promising approaches.

First, district leaders have seen chronically absent students return to school after they implemented a communication strategy tailored to their community’s values. In one district, that meant stressing that



chronically absent students are more likely to fall behind academically, fail to graduate, or have lower earnings later in life; in another, it meant emphasizing that the children were falling behind socially. When parents in one district were concerned about their children going to class with mental health issues, school leaders pointed out they had resources to help in person: peers, social workers, and school psychologists.

Relationships have also been critical for increasing students' connections to school. One district reported providing every student with a faculty mentor. Other districts have employed staff whose only role is to address student attendance. They may track student data, conduct home visits, and mitigate any known barriers to attendance. Some districts may take advantage of DPI's [Absenteeism Early Warning dashboard](#) to help determine how to devote these staff and other resources. Rhode Island has demonstrated this strategy at a [state](#) level, using its real-time dashboard to call mass attention to the issue.

Finally, making school a place that children want to be can be a powerful antidote to absenteeism. Simply making clear that their [presence is missed](#) can go a long way. Engaging and relevant curriculum and instruction increases how much students value school. Extracurricular activities and incentives may also play a role, such as time before or during school to play [basketball](#).

Overall, these districts have adopted supportive rather than punitive measures such as referring students for truancy tickets or involvement with the juvenile justice system. This approach generally aligns with [research](#) discouraging responses that do not account for factors outside a family's control or that interfere with a positive home-school relationship. Some wondered whether punitive measures may still have a role to play in other instances.

CONCLUSION

The stubbornly high rates of chronic absenteeism since the pandemic – affecting most districts and all student groups – do not appear poised to return to pre-pandemic norms without direct intervention. Districts that have dramatically reduced their chronic absenteeism rates prove that it is possible – but also that it requires intentional, intensive effort to do so.

Some district leaders expressed concern that they could not overcome chronic absenteeism on their own in the midst of broader issues such as housing instability, the erosion of the social contract since the pandemic, and inaccessible child care and transportation. They encouraged collaboration from other groups and units of government, from county services to district attorney offices, to address the issue.

Simply put, schools cannot fulfill their primary purpose of educating students when children are not in school. The longer chronic absenteeism remains a statewide issue, the longer it will take students to catch up, disrupting not only their education but also that of their peers. Wisconsin may look to its own districts and national entities alike for examples of those seeking to stem the pernicious influence of absenteeism for both today and the future.

