Research Report

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# Districts Try with Limited Success to Reduce Chronic Absenteeism

## Selected Findings from the Spring 2024 American School District Panel Survey and Interviews

## KEY FINDINGS

- About one in ten districts reported chronic absenteeism levels of 30 percent or more and another two in ten districts reported rates between 20 and 30 percent in the 2023–2024 school year. Although high, these rates were lower than the pandemic peak.
- In the 2023–2024 school year, nearly all districts (93 percent) tried at least one approach to combat chronic absenteeism. The most common approach was the adoption of an early warning system to flag students who are at risk of being chronically absent.
- One-quarter of districts reported that none of the approaches they have tried to reduce chronic absenteeism have been particularly effective.
- In interviews, 11 of 12 district leaders with whom we spoke speculated that a cultural shift has occurred, whereby more students and families see school as optional and of less importance.
- These district leaders hypothesized that chronic absenteeism will not improve without new approaches to make school more engaging.

In the year following the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) pandemic–related school closures in March 2020, educators began to sound the alarm about increasing chronic absenteeism. *Chronic absenteeism* is defined as a student missing at least 10 percent of school days (i.e., 18 days in a typical 180-day school year) for any reason, whether excused or unexcused. Chronic absence can severely hinder an individual student's learning (Cardona, 2024). Absences can even hinder the learning of those children who do attend school because of the re-teaching and disruptions that absences create (Gottfried, 2014).

Before the COVID-19 pandemic began, around 13 to 15 percent of students nationally were chronically absent in a typical school year (Malkus, 2024). Data suggest that chronic absenteeism skyrocketed in the aftermath of

**Abbreviations**

| | |
|---|---|
| ASDP | American School District Panel |
| CCD | Common Core of Data |
| COVID-19 | coronavirus disease 2019 |

pandemic-induced school closures, reaching a peak somewhere between 28 to 30 percent in the 2021–2022 school year (Attendance Works, 2023b; Attendance Works, 2024a; Chang, Chavez, and Hough, 2024; Dee, 2024; National Center for Education Statistics, 2022a; Return to Learn Tracker, undated). Although rates improved modestly in the 2022–2023 school year (Attendance Works, 2023a; FutureEd, 2024; Malkus, 2024; Misha, 2024), chronic absenteeism has become such a national emergency that Democratic and Republican lawmakers introduced 71 bills in 28 state legislatures in 2024 to prevent and address the problem (DiMarco, 2024).

Persistently high chronic absenteeism rates have left educators and policymakers across the United States wondering *why* elevated rates persist and *what* they can do to get students back in school. Media reports have speculated that changing cultural attitudes about the relative importance of schooling and parents' increased likelihood to keep their kids home for even a mild sickness might explain why (Mervosh and Paris, 2024; Wallace-Wells, 2024).

To get the latest information on the ongoing problem of chronic absenteeism, we both surveyed and interviewed leaders of districts who are members of the American School District Panel (ASDP). The ASDP is a research partnership between RAND and the Center on Reinventing Public Education. The panel also collaborates with several other education organizations, including the Council of the Great City Schools and Kitamba. Of the 1,318 public school districts that were members of the ASDP as of spring 2024, 190 districts completed our survey between March 6, 2024, and May 3, 2024 (a 14.4 percent completion rate). We weighted these districts' responses to our survey to make them representative of K–12 public school districts across the country. We complement these survey data with interviews of 12 leaders of these districts between April and June 2024. Although the interviews were conducted only with those who agreed in our survey to also participate in a short interview, they provide detail to better understand and extend our survey results. The full set of survey results can be viewed and user-friendly charts can be created in Bento, a free data visualization tool. To learn more about Bento, go to www.getbento.info/about or email bento@kitamba.com.

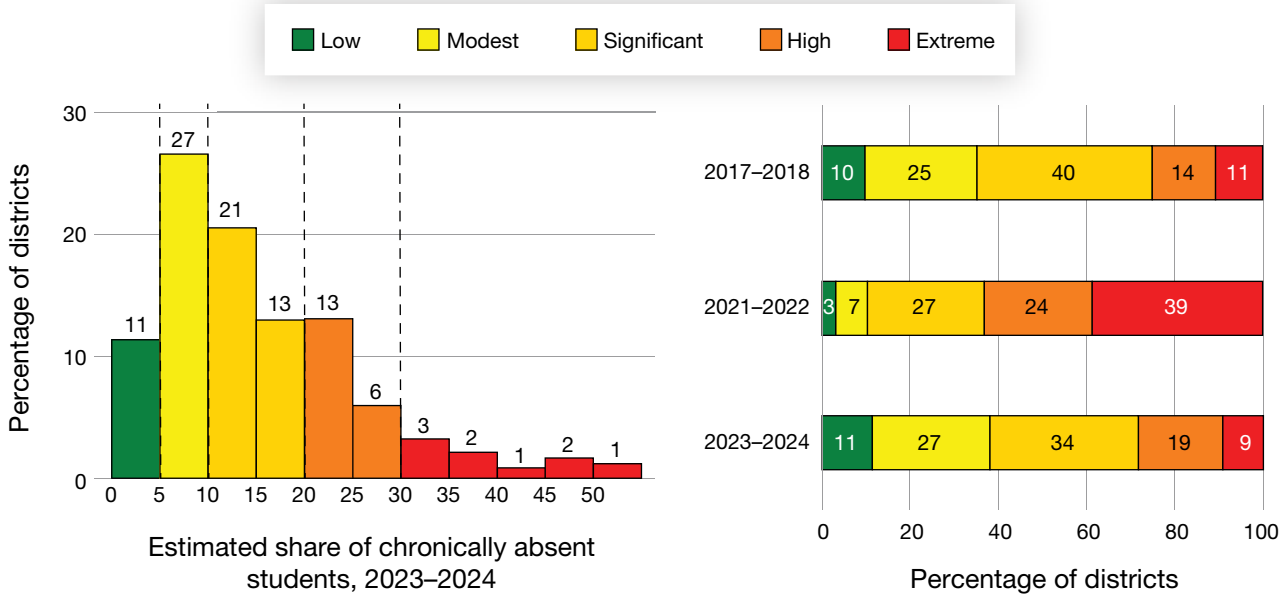
This report makes three main contributions to ongoing public discussions about chronic absenteeism. First, using our nationally representative survey data, we estimate the proportion of districts with elevated levels of chronic absenteeism during the most recent school year (2023–2024) and discuss how it compares with previous pre-pandemic and pandemic school years. Second, we provide national prevalence estimates of the approaches that districts are employing to reduce absenteeism and their perceptions about which of these approaches, if any, have been the most effective in getting students back to school. Third, we highlight perspectives from district leaders about *why* a greater share of children are missing school now than in the past and reflect on the extent to which these perspectives align with media speculation. Therefore, this report is intended for school district leaders, organizations focused on school attendance, and state policymakers.

## The Share of Districts with Extreme Chronic Absenteeism Rates Declined in 2023–2024

We first examined how many districts have large proportions of students who are chronically absent and whether that has changed over time. We categorized the severity of the absences using levels of chronic absence as defined by Attendance Works (Chang, Bauer, and Byrnes, 2018, p. 9): *low* (0 to 5 percent of students chronically absent), *modest* (5 to 10 percent of students chronically absent), *significant* (10 to 20 percent of students chronically absent), *high* (20 to 30 percent of students chronically absent), and *extreme* (30 percent or more of students chronically absent). The left side of Figure 1 shows the distribution of our surveyed districts across these severity levels in the 2023–2024 school year.

FIGURE 1

Percentage Distribution of Districts by Severity of Chronic Absenteeism Levels




NOTE: This figure depicts response data from the following survey question: "What percentage of your students have missed 10 percent or more of school days (i.e., have been chronically absent) during the 2023–2024 school year?" ($n$ = 170). We categorized districts by the severity of their chronic absenteeism levels using definitions from Attendance Works (2023a). Data for the 2017–2018 and 2021–2022 school years are from Attendance Works (2024b).

As shown in red, about one in ten of our surveyed districts reported extreme chronic absenteeism levels in 2023–2024. Likewise, as shown in green, about one in ten districts had low absenteeism levels. Most districts fell in the middle of the spectrum. That is, about two or three districts of ten had modest, significant, and high rates of absenteeism in 2023–2024.

On the right side of Figure 1, we used data from Attendance Works (2024b) to add two additional school years of student absenteeism rates to compare how bad absenteeism was in 2023–2024 with previous school years. Looking at the right side of Figure 1, we see that the distribution of our surveyed districts in 2023–2024 was highly similar to the distribution in the 2017–2018 (pre-pandemic) school year. For example, the 9 percent of districts that had extreme chronic absenteeism rates in 2023–2024—although still concerningly high—was roughly on par with the percentage of districts in 2017–2018. Put another way, the right side of Figure 1 shows that the proportion of districts with large numbers of chronically absent students have reverted from the most severe levels in 2021–2022 back to a pre-pandemic "normal" as of 2023–2024.

## We Estimate That 19 Percent of Students Were Chronically Absent in 2023–2024

Figure 1 shows that districts' chronic absenteeism rates in 2023–2024 varied across districts. We also examined whether districts' absenteeism rates varied by district size, poverty, and racial composition. We found that large districts, high-poverty districts, and districts serving mostly students of color reported higher chronic absenteeism rates on average than their counterparts in smaller districts, low-poverty districts, and districts serving mostly White students. The largest differences, however, were by district enrollment size, as shown in the text box. That is, large

districts reported an average chronic absenteeism rate of 24 percent compared with 13 percent in small districts and 14 percent in medium districts. The difference between (1) large districts and (2) small and medium districts is statistically significant. These differences are long-standing trends that predate the pandemic and have continued post-pandemic (Attendance Works, 2023b; Malkus, 2024).

We also developed a back-of-the-envelope estimate of the national chronic absenteeism rate in 2023–2024 derived from our nationally representative survey of public school districts. (See the text box for more details.) In Figure 2, we present our national estimate alongside annual chronic absenteeism rates for school years 2016–2017 through 2022–2023 that we obtained from Malkus (2024).[1] Although the Malkus estimates were constructed using a different methodology than ours, we include them side-by-side in Figure 2 to provide the best available context to interpret our 2023–2024 estimate. Nevertheless, readers should use caution when interpreting this trendline because our estimate is both derived through a different method and imprecise because of our data limitations.

We estimate that roughly 19 percent of K–12 students nationally (or about 9.4 million students) were chronically absent in 2023–2024. This is lower than the estimated 28 percent of students who were

### How We Calculated Chronic Absenteeism for 2023–2024

In our spring 2024 survey of a nationally representative sample of public school district leaders, we asked "What percentage of your students have missed 10 percent or more of school days (i.e., have been chronically absent) during the 2023–2024 school year?" Overall, district leaders estimated that, on average, 14 percent of their students were chronically absent during 2023–2024. Importantly, however, we found that districts' estimates of their chronic absenteeism rate varied substantially by district enrollment size, as shown in column A of Table 1. This means that we need to account for these differences in student enrollments when constructing our national estimates. Therefore, to construct a national estimate of the number and percentage of students chronically absent in 2023–2024, we applied differential chronic absenteeism rates by district size.[a] That is, using the 2022–2023 CCD, we calculated the total number of students enrolled in small, medium, and large districts (see column B of Table 1). We then multiplied these student counts by the districts' estimated chronic absenteeism rate to obtain counts of absent students by district enrollment size (see column C of Table 1). Our final estimated national absenteeism rate is 19 percent (9.4 million divided by 49.5 million).

TABLE 1

Absenteeism Numbers and Rates by District Size

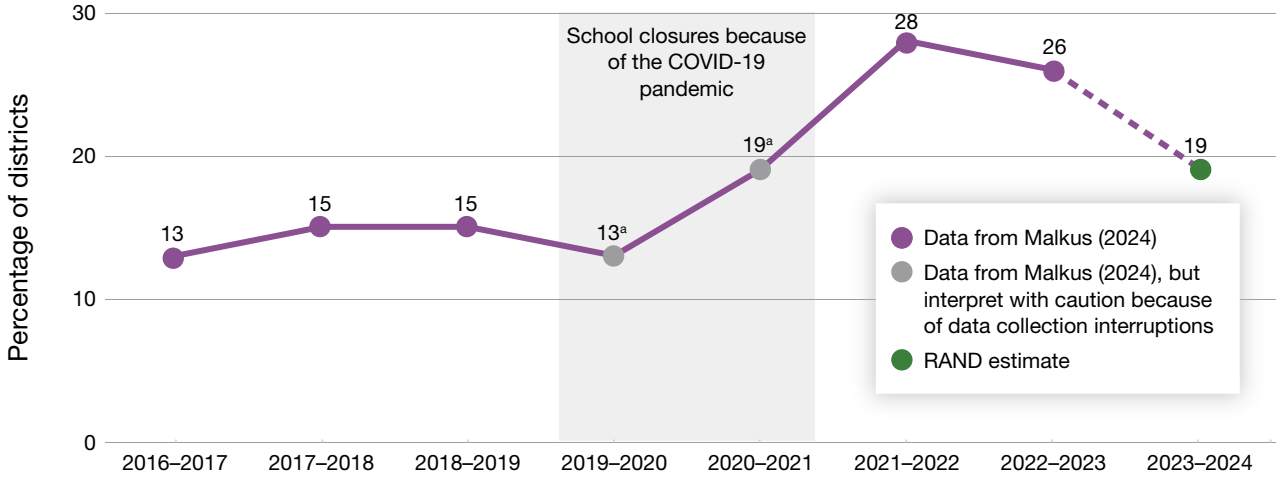
| District Size | Average Chronic Absenteeism Rate as Reported by Surveyed Districts (column A) | Total Number of Students (column B) | Number of Students Absent (column C) |
|---|---|---|---|
| All districts | 14 | 49,500,000 | 9,400,000 |
| Small (less than 3,000) | 13 | 11,400,000 | 1,500,000 |
| Medium (3,000 to 9,999) | 15 | 12,400,000 | 1,800,000 |
| Large (10,000 or more) | 24 | 25,700,000 | 6,100,000 |

NOTE: The data in column A come from our nationally representative survey of K–12 public school districts. Absenteeism rates are weighted using our survey weights. The data in column B come from the 2022–2023 CCD (National Center for Education Statistics, 2023).

[a] Another option was to individually multiply districts' chronic absenteeism rates by their enrollment sizes to obtain the total number of chronically absent students in each district. This method leads to an overestimate of the total number of chronically absent students after survey weights are applied to make these districts nationally representative. This is because our survey weights are designed to make the population of districts representative, not the population of students representative. Very large districts (that enroll hundreds of thousands of students) can get large survey weights that, when applied, drastically overestimate the known national student population. Our method fixes the total student population to a known quantity obtained from the Common Core of Data (CCD), while accounting for differential chronic absenteeism rates by district size.

FIGURE 2

## Chronic Absenteeism Rates by School Year




SOURCE: Data for school years 2016–2017 through 2022–2023 were obtained from Malkus (2024). Data from 2023–2024 were obtained from our nationally representative survey of districts. See the text box for more information about how we constructed this estimate.

[a] Data collection was particularly unreliable during these school years because of the transition to remote instruction that occurred during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic. Some districts stopped reporting attendance data and those that did report likely used differing definitions of attendance (Schwartz et al., 2021). To signal that these data should be interpreted with extreme caution, we have grayed out these two data points.

chronically absent in 2021–2022, but still above the pre-pandemic rate of about 15 percent. Although we suspect that our estimate correctly identifies a pattern of continued recovery, we also suspect that, for several reasons, our estimate underestimates the true number of students who were chronically absent in 2023–2024. First, we use district leaders' reports—which may be rough recollections—from a small sample of districts. Second, we use survey data instead of administrative data, which are likely more precise. Third, we posed this question about chronic absenteeism in the 2023–2024 school year between March and May 2024, so we may be missing students who became chronically absent during the last weeks of the school year.

## Districts Combated Absenteeism with Multiple Approaches in 2023–2024, but Few Report Them to Be Effective

We asked districts which, if any, of four approaches we listed in the survey (plus a fifth "other" option) they employed to address chronic absenteeism in 2023–2024. Ninety-three percent of districts selected one or more of the approaches we listed, and the remaining 7 percent of districts reported that they did not try any of those approaches to reduce chronic absenteeism. Of the 93 percent of districts that are trying something, districts on average identified trying two approaches. High-poverty districts—which have historically had some of the highest absenteeism rates and where absenteeism disproportionately increased during the pandemic (Attendance Works, 2023b; Malkus, 2024)—reported trying more approaches than their low-poverty counterparts did.

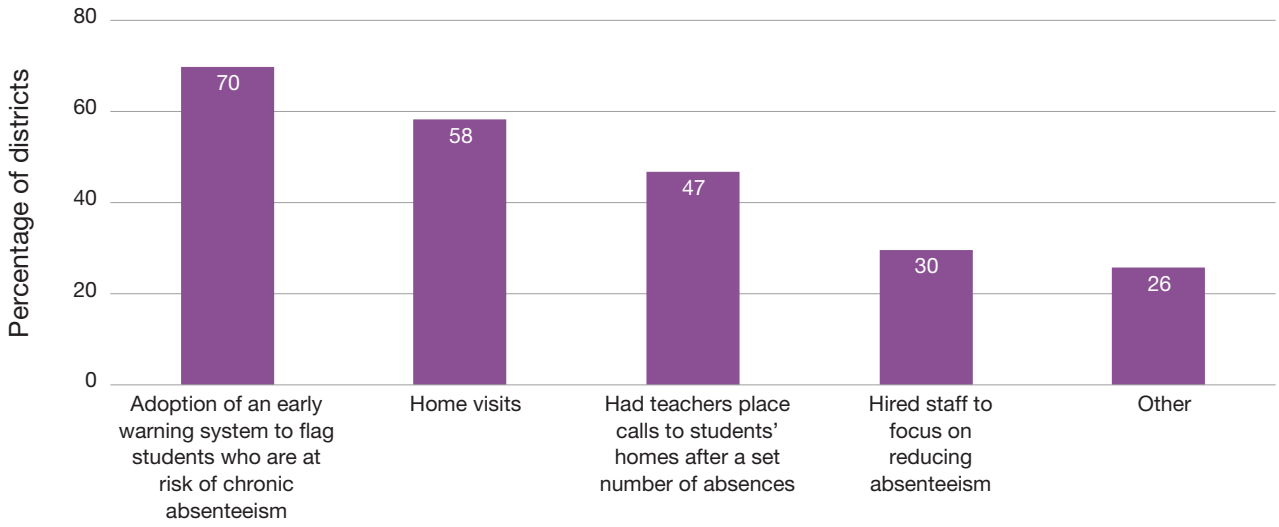
> "We have a large community apathy issue where [parents are not committed] to their students needing to be at school on a regular basis."
>
> — Leader of a medium-sized suburban district

In Figure 3, we display the share of districts that reported that their schools had tried various approaches to reduce chronic absenteeism. The most common approach, which 70 percent of districts overall used in 2023–2024, was an early warning system to flag students who are potentially at risk of chronic absenteeism. Meanwhile, 58 percent of districts reported trying home visits, 47 percent reported having teachers place calls to students' homes, and 30 percent said that they had hired staff specifically to focus on reducing absenteeism. Twenty-six percent of districts reported trying other approaches than those we listed. Looking at these other responses, districts most typically mentioned incentives for increased attendance and the use of state truancy laws to get students back in school.

We then asked districts which of the approaches that they tried were most effective at reducing chronic absenteeism. As shown in Figure 4, no single approach emerged as the most effective, according to districts, at reducing chronic absenteeism. Indeed, roughly one-quarter of districts (23 percent) said that none of the activities that they had tried have been particularly effective at reducing absenteeism (results not shown). Among the roughly 70 percent of districts that adopted an early warning system, 25 percent reported that this was their most effective approach to reducing absenteeism. Although fewer districts hired staff to focus on absenteeism, one-third of those that did considered this their most effective approach. The lack of consensus could mean that no method was particularly effective, or it could simply mean that the effectiveness of any one

FIGURE 3

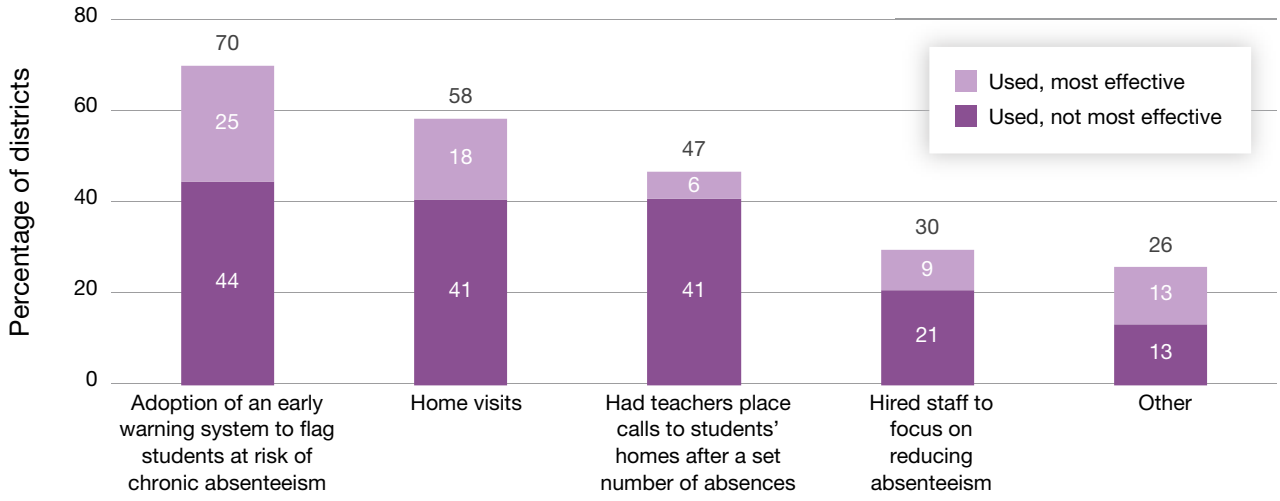
Districts' Approaches to Chronic Absenteeism in 2023–2024




NOTE: This figure depicts response data from the following survey question: "Which of the following approaches, if any, have schools in your district tried to reduce chronic absenteeism among your students?" ($n$ = 172). Respondents were instructed to select all that apply.

FIGURE 4

Districts' Approaches to Chronic Absenteeism in 2023–2024, by Leaders' Perceptions of Effectiveness




NOTE: This figure depicts response data from the following survey questions: "Which of the following approaches, if any, have schools in your district tried to reduce chronic absenteeism among your students?" and "Which of these approaches do you deem most effective at reducing chronic absenteeism?" ($n$ = 172). Respondents were instructed to select all that apply.

approach is highly contingent on context, such that no one method would emerge as a clear leader. Nevertheless, the low proportion of districts that identified one of their own approaches as the most effective at reducing absences indicates that absences are a stubborn problem that is not easily solved by any one intervention alone.

## Leaders Described a Cultural Shift Away from Viewing Attendance as Compulsory, but Pre-Pandemic Reasons for Absenteeism Also Persist

To investigate district leaders' perceptions about the reasons *why* chronic absenteeism remains high, we interviewed 12 district leaders from urban, suburban, and rural districts serving a variety of student populations. (In the methodology section at the end of this report, we list interview counts by district locale.) All the leaders with whom we spoke estimated that their chronic absenteeism rates were higher than their pre-pandemic rates, and we asked them why they thought that their rates of chronic absenteeism were still higher. All but one of these 12 leaders reported that they have noticed a shift in student and parental attitudes away from viewing school as compulsory and suggested that this shift drove some of the increase in chronic absenteeism. In a comment echoed by other respondents, a leader from a medium-sized suburban district where 42 percent of students were chronically absent in 2023–2024 reported, "I think COVID [changed] . . . the 'I have to go to school to learn' mentality. . . . We weren't expecting it at the scale that

> "I think kids are pushing that envelope now of, 'How much school can I not attend in person and still be okay?'"
>
> — District leader

it is." Another leader from a medium-sized suburban district with a 30 percent chronic absenteeism rate in 2023–2024 told us, "We have a large community apathy issue where [parents are not committed] to their students needing to be at school on a regular basis." Leaders reported that these shifts were seen across their various demographic groups. These findings align with speculation in the media about new, post-pandemic reasons for why students are missing so much school (Mervosh and Paris, 2024; Wallace-Wells, 2024).

Leaders we interviewed attributed this shift in attitude to several pandemic-related factors:

1. Districts relaxed their expectations and messaging around daily attendance during the pandemic, and students got into the habit of not attending school. Some leaders connected this habit to "over-quarantining" students for even minor illnesses.
2. Families got used to the flexibility allowed during the pandemic and have continued to keep kids home (or take trips) knowing that pandemic-era technology tools allow them to continue to access lessons while still accruing absences. All the leaders with whom we spoke articulated a belief that the vast majority of students benefited from in-person learning and not missing other non-lesson learning time.
3. Continued teacher staffing challenges and heightened rates of teacher absences also contributed to student absenteeism. A leader in a large urban district with more than 30 percent of students chronically absent noted that "sometimes kids don't come to school because there's been a sub in the room all year and it feels awful."
4. On returning to in-person learning after the pandemic, students did not find school to be engaging, so their drive to go to school diminished. A leader from a medium-sized suburban district with a 35 percent chronic absence rate told us, "I think kids are pushing that envelope now of, 'How much school can I not attend in person and still be okay?'" Another leader whose medium-sized, rural district had an 11 percent chronic absence rate similarly reported, "To ask kids to sit in rows and columns and listen to somebody lecture at them for seven hours a day is just not something that they're going to put up with anymore."
5. More students experienced anxiety or other mental health challenges, increasing their resistance to going to school.
6. The pandemic placed financial strain on some families that pushed some students to work or care for siblings instead of attend school.

To be sure, each of the leaders with whom we spoke also believed that the reasons students were chronically absent pre-pandemic persisted as well. These reasons included transportation challenges and suspensions.

> By and large, leaders did not believe that the interventions they tried were as effective as they should be or as effective with all students because of the variety of reasons why students miss school.

## Leaders' Hypothesized That Relationships and Engagement Are the Most Important to Intervention Success

Mirroring our survey results, shown in Figure 3, all the leaders we interviewed reported that their districts had adopted multiple strategies to directly address chronic absenteeism, including the strate-

gies we asked about in the survey, such as conducting home visits, adopting an early warning system, hiring staff to support chronically absent students, and calling students' guardians after a set number of absences.

And, like the survey results, we heard from these leaders that these interventions were yielding mixed results. By and large, leaders did not believe that these interventions were as effective as they should be or as effective with all students because of the variety of reasons why students miss school. A leader of a medium-sized suburban district with a 35 percent chronic absenteeism rate described mixed results for home visits and an early warning system: "I think that there's a subset of kids for whom it's made a big difference, and then there's another subset of kids for whom it hasn't really made much difference at all." Another leader in a medium-sized suburban district with a 5 percent chronic absenteeism rate echoed the sentiment that approaches need to be well matched to the reason students are absent: "The most effective approach is not to have a single most effective approach."

There were some bright spots, however. At least seven leaders with whom we spoke noted that the interventions they perceived to be working were those that built new or leveraged existing relationships. These leaders identified such examples as adding mental health services, adding social-emotional learning programs, and working to build or restore relationships with students and families struggling with absenteeism. In states with more stringent truancy laws, district leaders reported using truancy officers and laws as a last resort to engage students and families, primarily because their use would further damage their already strained relationships.

Five of 12 district leaders with whom we spoke added programs to make school more engaging and welcoming for all students (as opposed to programs that target students at risk of chronic absenteeism). For example, a leader in a relatively affluent and small rural district with a 10 percent chronic absenteeism rate talked about how their district had begun to adopt more engaging lessons and group projects that emphasize the social aspects of learning, as well as encouraging in person attendance. Another leader

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in a mid-sized suburban district with a high rate of chronic absenteeism talked about their efforts to make coursework directly applicable to career skills, since these programs are a "quick way to catch a kid's attention and get them to come to school." One leader of a medium-sized suburban district summarized the sentiment as "if the work that you do every day is not relevant and meaningful, [students] stop showing up."

District leaders also talked about mounting efforts to move toward emphasizing the importance of daily attendance when talking with parents. One leader in a small rural district talked about how they had recently received feedback from families that the district's letters home were "very harsh" and "made them uncomfortable." Leaders in both urban and rural districts told us that they had changed their communications with parents to emphasize the "correlation of education with success." One leader in a medium-sized suburban district reported that their district's home communication strategies were ineffective at reducing chronic absenteeism because the "whole system needs to change," such as helping families see the value of attending school and creating deeper learning experiences that challenge and engage students.

## Implications

Students still have a long way to go to make up lost ground in academic learning from pandemic setbacks (e.g., Lewis and Kuhfeld, 2023; Miller, Mervosh, and Paris, 2024). But it will be more difficult for them to recover if they are regularly absent from school, no matter the reason. Data from our nationally representative survey of K–12 public school districts show that chronic absences are still above pre-pandemic rates, but below the pandemic peak. The improvement is welcome but hardly cause for celebration because chronic absenteeism was a concern even before the pandemic.

The district leaders we surveyed and interviewed were at least somewhat skeptical that their established approaches to combat chronic absenteeism, such as early warning systems and calls to students' homes, were effective at reducing chronic absenteeism. The district leaders we interviewed speculated that continued heightened chronic absenteeism rates can be attributed, at least in part, to changing cultural norms about whether schooling is really compulsory and pandemic-era changes to schooling (such as the proliferation of devices and learning management systems) that make it easier for students to check in and check out of school. They also reported that improving student and family relationships with the school and taking steps to make school more relevant to students are likely keys to boosting attendance.

In summary, our data suggest that chronic absenteeism remained a widespread problem in 2023–2024, and one that districts felt limited in their ability to address.

In summary, our data suggest that chronic absenteeism remained a widespread problem in 2023–2024, and one that districts felt limited in their ability to address. The chronic absenteeism crisis might continue to recede as the country continues to recover from the many disruptions brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic. But even if chronic absenteeism rates recede back to pre-pandemic levels in subsequent school years, these rates are still sufficiently high to merit sustained effort at improvement. Our results suggest that one place to start is building an evidence base around the following three strategies that district leaders (and other researchers) have suggested could work:

- **Fine-tune established approaches to combatting chronic absenteeism (e.g., calls to students' homes, home visits, and hiring dedicated staff) to work better in a post-pandemic context.** In interviews and in responses to our survey, leaders suggested that existing approaches to combating chronic absenteeism were sometimes effective and at other times not. Districts should track how and when these interventions are most effective and for which student populations. Beyond the established interventions, districts should consider new approaches that leverage students' relationships at school and ensure that school is relevant and engaging. Researchers should work with districts to better understand how and when home visits, calls to students' homes, and additional staff are most effective and develop ways to fine tune these interventions. This will help districts to not only implement more-effective interventions but also target them appropriately to the student populations that they serve.
- **Increase families' perceived salience of school attendance for their child's academic success.** Surveys of parents have found that students' top reasons for missing multiple days of school include such things as oversleeping and not wanting to attend because of anxiety, which suggests that there is room to further impress on parents the importance of daily attendance (Saavedra, Polikoff, and

Silver, 2024). District leaders who we interviewed similarly perceived that many students and families might not be prioritizing attending school because they do not understand that attendance every day is critical for the vast majority of students' long-term success. Schools can work to combat this misconception by messaging to students and families that attending school every day *is* necessary for students' long-term outcomes. In these communication efforts, schools should move away from general messaging ("absences are bad") to more targeted messaging that pointedly communicates to parents information about their own student's situation. Evidence has suggested that parents largely do not realize that *it is their own child* whose learning is still suffering after several years of pandemic-related disruptions to schooling (Kane and Reardon, 2023) and that this may be one of the reasons for low levels of concern about students' academic recovery. More-targeted messaging to help parents become more aware that their own child is not on track—combined with messages that reinforce the importance of schooling—may help impress on them the importance of getting their child to school every day and promote schooling as connected to their child's future success.

- **Try more and new approaches to improve students' relationships with adults and students at school.** Although no silver bullet can improve attendance, a throughline in the approaches that interviewed leaders *did* perceive as helpful was increasing students' social connectedness at school. Whether through counselors, personalized greetings, social and emotional instruction, or engaging group work, schools have long worked to make schools welcoming and safe places where students to want to come. New technology could help overcome language barriers and lower the burden for schools to initiate customized communication with parents and students. Schools can also continue to focus on ensuring that every student feels that they matter to at least one adult at the school.

Although no silver bullet can improve attendance, a throughline in the approaches that interviewed leaders did perceive as helpful was increasing students' social connectedness at school.

## Methodology

Our methodology for analyzing survey data remains relatively consistent across survey waves; therefore, the description of our methods that follows is text that we updated from a previous publication (Diliberti and Schwartz, 2024).

### Data Sources

Starting in fall 2020 and in several waves since, we randomly sampled districts to invite them to enroll in the ASDP. (Districts that are members of the Council of the Great City Schools were sampled with certainty.) All enrolled districts were invited to complete the spring 2024 ASDP survey. This survey—the ninth in the ASDP series—was fielded from March 6, 2024, through May 3, 2024. Of the 1,318 public school districts that enrolled in the panel between fall 2020 and spring 2024, 190 districts completed surveys (a 14.4 percent survey completion rate). We designed the ten-minute survey to allow multiple different respondents from the same district central office to complete portions of the survey. We recommended that superintendents, directors of academics, research

directors, or community supports directors complete the survey items we analyzed in this report. However, we do not know which person(s) in each district completed the survey on behalf of their district.

Survey responses were weighted to be representative of the national population of public school districts, not the national population of public school students. Students are not evenly distributed across school districts. More specifically, among the population of 13,000 school districts in the United States, only 7 percent are in urban areas, whereas 25 percent are in suburban areas and 69 percent are in rural areas (Grant et al., 2024). Yet, roughly 30 percent of the country's 50 million public school students are enrolled in urban districts (National Center for Education Statistics, undated-a). And the country's 120 largest school districts alone (which represent less than 1 percent of all public school districts)—many of which are urban—account for roughly 20 percent of all student enrollment (National Center for Education Statistics, undated-b). Thus, although rural districts represent a majority of school districts, they do not represent a majority of public school students. For more information about the sampling and weighting procedures for the spring 2024 ASDP survey, see Grant et al., 2024.

We complemented our survey data with data from interviews conducted with 12 district superintendents and leaders in 11 states. These leaders represent districts that vary in size from one that served fewer than 1,000 students to one that served more than 100,000 students. Many of these district leaders tended to serve suburban districts, although we also interviewed leaders from urban and rural districts (see Table 2).

The leaders that participated in these interviews were in districts that completed the spring 2024 ASDP survey and volunteered in the survey to participate in a phone interview about chronic absenteeism in their district. We invited all who volunteered to participate and 12 leaders completed interviews between April and June 2024. The interviews were semistructured and touched on the following topics: (1) their district's rate of chronic absenteeism before and after the COVID-19 pandemic, (2) their perceptions of what was driving chronic absenteeism in their district, and (3) the various programs and interventions they have implemented to address chronic absenteeism. These interviews lasted between 20 minutes and 35 minutes, and each was audio recorded and transcribed. We then coded these data thematically and created matrices to track patterns across respondents. We chose the main themes because we heard them from at least one-half of the interview participants and because they added detail to the results from the survey.

TABLE 2
District Participation in Qualitative Interviews

| Region | Size | Locale | Reported Chronic Absenteeism Rate (2023–2024) |
|---|---|---|---|
| Midwest | Medium | Suburban | 35% |
| Northeast | Medium | Suburban | 30% |
| South | Small | Suburban | 24% |
| Midwest | Small | Rural | 10% |
| South | Medium | Urban | 9% |
| Northeast | Medium | Suburban | 5% |
| South | Small | Rural | 25% |
| Midwest | Medium | Suburban | 30% |
| West | Medium | Rural | 10% |
| Midwest | Medium | Urban | 42% |
| Midwest | Small | Rural | 15% |
| Northeast | Large | Urban | 33% |

## Analysis

We examined differences in districts' responses to the spring 2024 survey by district context. We obtained data on district demographics by linking survey data files to the 2021–2022 CCD issued by the National Center for Education Statistics (2022b). We analyzed differences by the following district characteristics:

- locale (urban, suburban, and rural)
- student racial and ethnic composition (we categorize districts in which more than one-half of students are Black, Hispanic, Asian, Pacific Islander, American Indian or Alaska

Native or of two or more races as having *majority students of color*, with the remaining districts categorized as having *majority White students*)

- poverty level (districts in which one-half or more of students qualify for a free or reduced-price lunch are categorized as *high poverty*, whereas the remainder are categorized as *low poverty*)
- enrollment size (we categorize districts that enroll fewer than 3,000 students as *small* and districts with 10,000 or more students as *large*; we categorize the remaining districts as *medium*).

For all spring 2024 survey estimates, we conducted significance testing to assess whether subgroups were statistically different at the $p < 0.05$ level. Specifically, we tested whether the percentage of districts in one subgroup reporting a response was statistically different from the remaining districts that took the survey (e.g., low-poverty districts versus districts that are not low poverty). In this report, we call attention to only those differences among district subgroups that are statistically significant at the 5 percent level, unless otherwise noted. It is important to keep in mind that each district that took our survey has multiple characteristics. Thus, patterns observed across district contexts might be driven by the same set of districts that share multiple characteristics. Because of our small sample size, we are unable to disentangle these relationships. Additionally, because of the exploratory nature of this study, we did not apply multiple hypothesis test corrections.

## Note

[1] See Malkus (2024) for more details about how these annual national chronic absenteeism rates were collected and constructed. Although these data are imperfect (e.g., data are missing for some states, data are compiled from multiple sources that present some comparability issues), they are likely the best available data to investigate trends in chronic absenteeism.

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## About This Report

In spring 2024, we surveyed 190 school district leaders about chronic absenteeism in their districts and interviewed 12 of these districts' leaders to complement the survey responses. This series is intended to provide brief analyses of educator survey results of immediate interest to policymakers, practitioners, and researchers. To learn more about the dataset, see *Technical Documentation for the Ninth American School District Panel Survey* (Grant et al., 2024) for more information on survey recruitment, administration, and sample weighting.

The American Educator Panels (AEP) are nationally representative samples of teachers, school leaders, and district leaders across the country. The panels are a proud member of the American Association for Public Opinion Research's Transparency Initiative. If you are interested in using AEP data for your own surveys or analysis or in reading other publications related to the AEP, please email aep@rand.org or visit www.rand.org/aep. Through the AEP Data Portal available from that site, researchers can download survey data files to perform their own analyses.

The American School District Panel (ASDP) is a research partnership between RAND and the Center on Reinventing Public Education. The panel also collaborates with several other education organizations—including the Council of the Great City Schools and Kitamba—to help ensure we produce actionable results. For more information, visit the ASDP website at www.americanschooldistrictpanel.org.

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