Getting Down to FACTS

The State of Chronic Absenteeism in California: Projections, Reasons, and Solutions

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Introduction

While the unprecedented surge in chronic absenteeism across California at the height of the pandemic has subsided, rates remain nearly twice their pre-pandemic levels, with nearly 1 in 5 students missing 10% or more of the 2024-25 school year (California Department of Education, 2026). Further reducing chronic absence remains an urgent priority across the state—not only does it erode critical learning opportunities for students, but the financial bottom line for districts. In response to this urgency, California recently joined 15 other states in pledging to reduce chronic absence by 50% over the next four years (Attendance Works, 2026) with a goal of 12.5% by 2030 (California Collaborative for Educational Excellence, 2025). This ambitious goal requires sustained and coordinated efforts alongside resources and solutions to tackle absenteeism and its underlying causes, many of which are rooted in complex and multifaceted challenges facing students and families.

It is against this backdrop that we provide insights into four main topics about chronic absence to help inform and guide policy and practice aimed at reducing chronic absence in California:

I. **The State of Chronic Absence.** We provide the most up-to-date status of chronic absence across California, focusing on its prevalence among the state's most vulnerable student groups and by geographic locales.

II. **Future Projections.** We present projections towards reducing chronic absence to their pre-pandemic levels, underscoring the need to accelerate towards that goal.

III. **Reasons for Absences.** We look at patterns and trends over time for why 9th and 11th graders miss school. Chronic absence dramatically rises during later these grades, and this evidence can

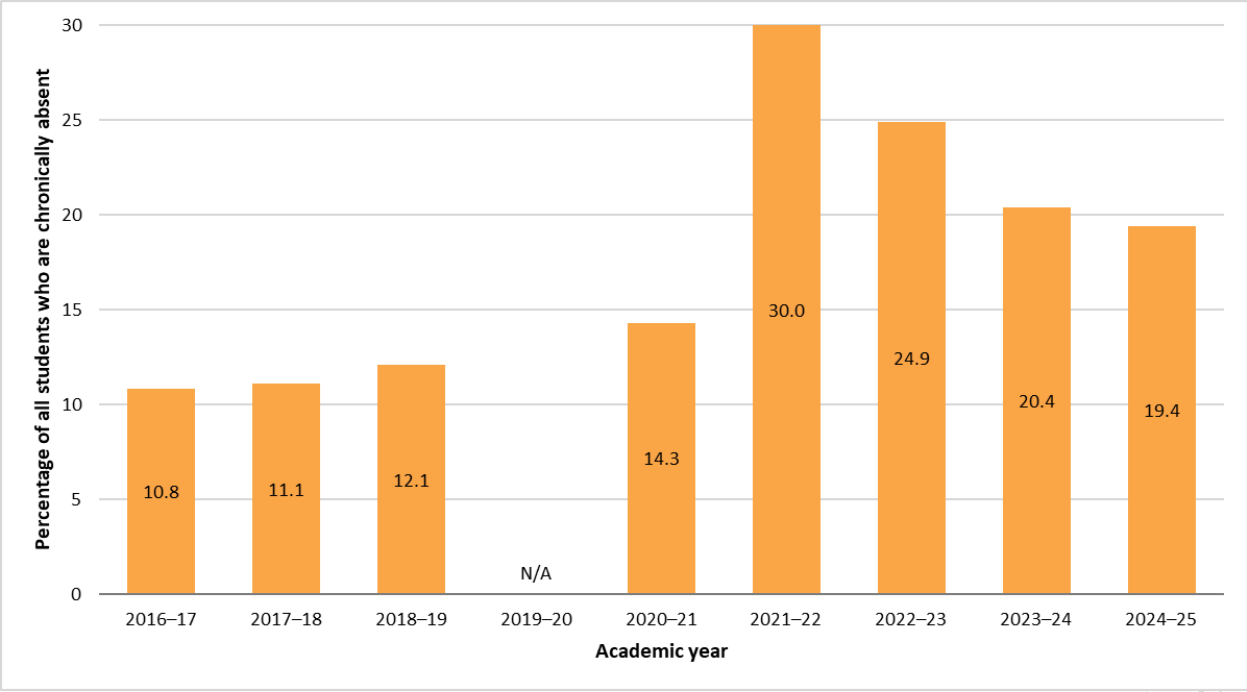
be used to strategically identify malleable reasons that school and districts can readily address to reduce absences.

IV. **Evidence-Based Solutions.** Finally, we provide the latest evidence about effective solutions to reduce chronic absence, with some already being implemented in the state.

I. The State of Chronic Absence in California

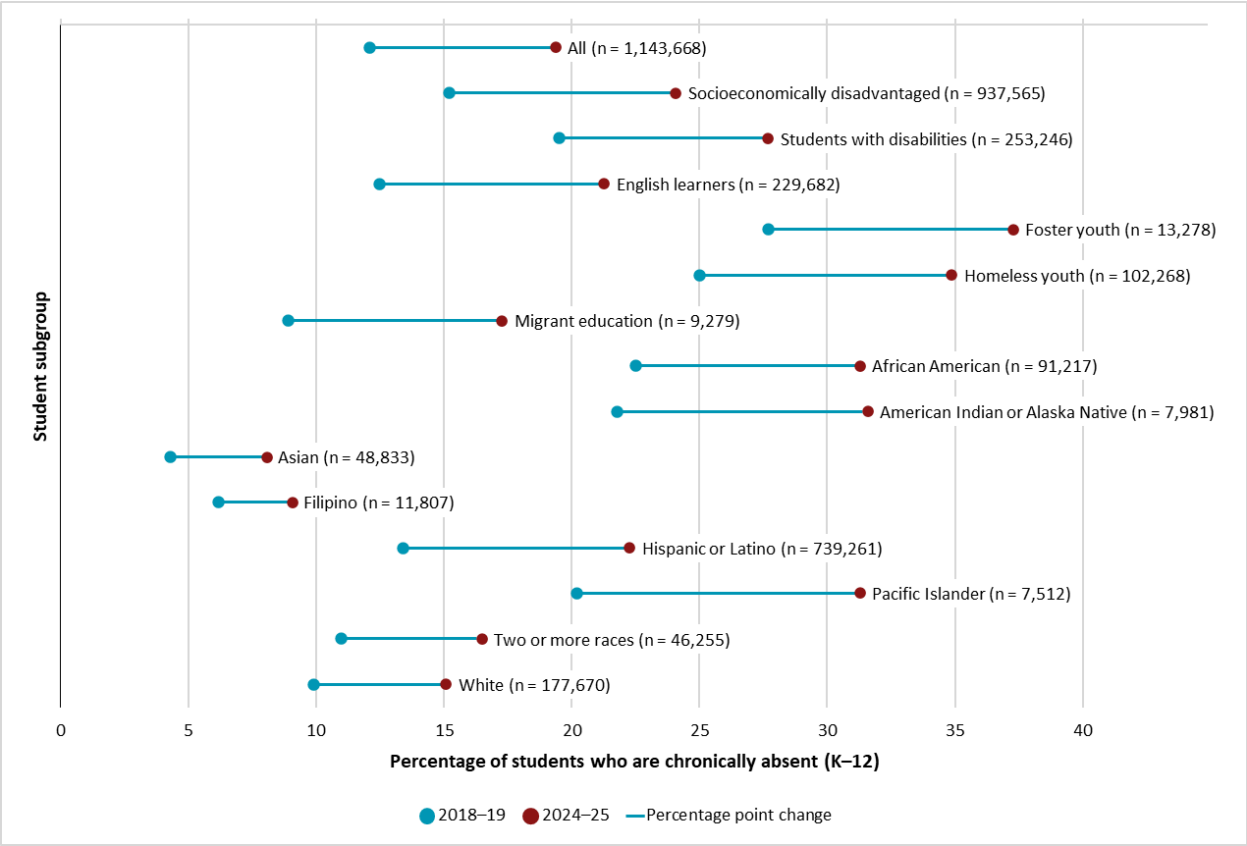
Historically, chronic absence in the three years prior to the pandemic hovered around 11 percent, on average (Figure 1). However, due to the pandemic, rates spiked dramatically, increasing threefold in the 2021-22 school year to nearly 30%. Rates have steadily subsided since their peak, but they continue to be nearly double the pre-pandemic rates. Notably, the most recent decline in 2024-25 stagnated, only decreasing 1 percentage point compared to the prior year.

Figure 1. Yearly Chronic Absence Rates



Note. The COVID-19 pandemic resulted in statewide physical school closures in February/March 2020 followed by the widespread implementation of distance learning during the 2020–21 academic year. The California Department of Education (CDE) has determined that absenteeism data are not valid and reliable for the 2019–20 academic year. Source: California Department of Education.

Figure 2. Pre- vs. Post-Pandemic Chronic Absence Rates by Student Group

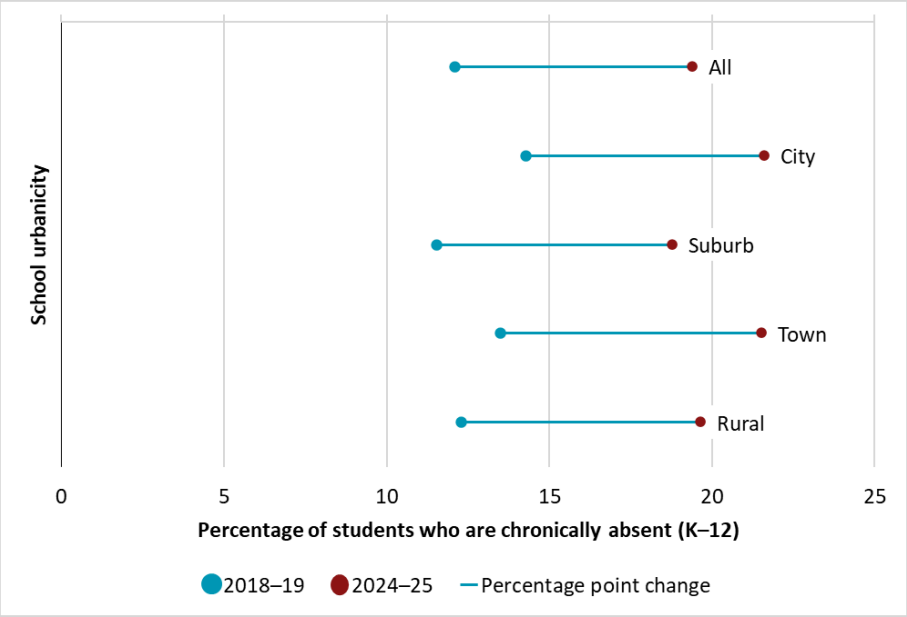


Note. N sizes in parentheses are the number of chronically absent students in the subgroup in the 2024-25 school year.
Source: California Department of Education.

While all student groups exhibited similar patterns over time in chronic absence—a pronounced spike during the 2021-22 school year, followed by a steady decline—students from marginalized backgrounds experienced some of the largest increases pre- to post-pandemic (Figure 2). In fact, when comparing rates between 2018-19 and 2024-25, increases in chronic absence among particular disadvantaged student groups were greater than the increase for all students (see Table A1 in the Appendix). This includes students identified as socioeconomically disadvantaged (1.6 percentage point difference), students with disabilities (0.9 pp difference), English learners (1.5 pp difference), foster youth (2.3 pp difference), homeless youth (2.6 pp difference), and student in migrant education (1.1 pp difference). Among these student groups, the largest increases occurred for homeless youth (9.9 pp) , foster youth (9.6 pp), and socioeconomically disadvantaged students (8.9 pp). Also, by race and ethnicity, increases

were more pronounced among students who identify as African American, American Indian or Alaska Native, Pacific Islander, and Hispanic or Latino. Pacific Islander students experienced the largest increase (11.1 pp), followed by American Indian or Alaska Native students (9.8 pp).

Figure 3. Pre- vs. Post-Pandemic Chronic Absence Rates by School Locale



Source: California Department of Education.

Beyond student groups, increases in chronic absence rates before and after the pandemic by geographic locale were similar for schools in cities (e.g., Los Angeles), suburbs (e.g., Alameda), towns (e.g., Half Moon Bay), and rural areas (e.g., Paradise) (Figure 3). Schools in cities and towns had slightly higher baseline rates, on average (around 2.5 percentage points) than suburban and rural areas. While these increases are relatively uniform across locales, a deeper root causes analysis would be useful to understand how underlying drivers of chronic absence differ across locales. For instance, chronic absenteeism in rural locales tends to be higher due to transportation challenges as well as rapid demographic shifts, particularly the growth in migrant populations, who face unique barriers to attendance.

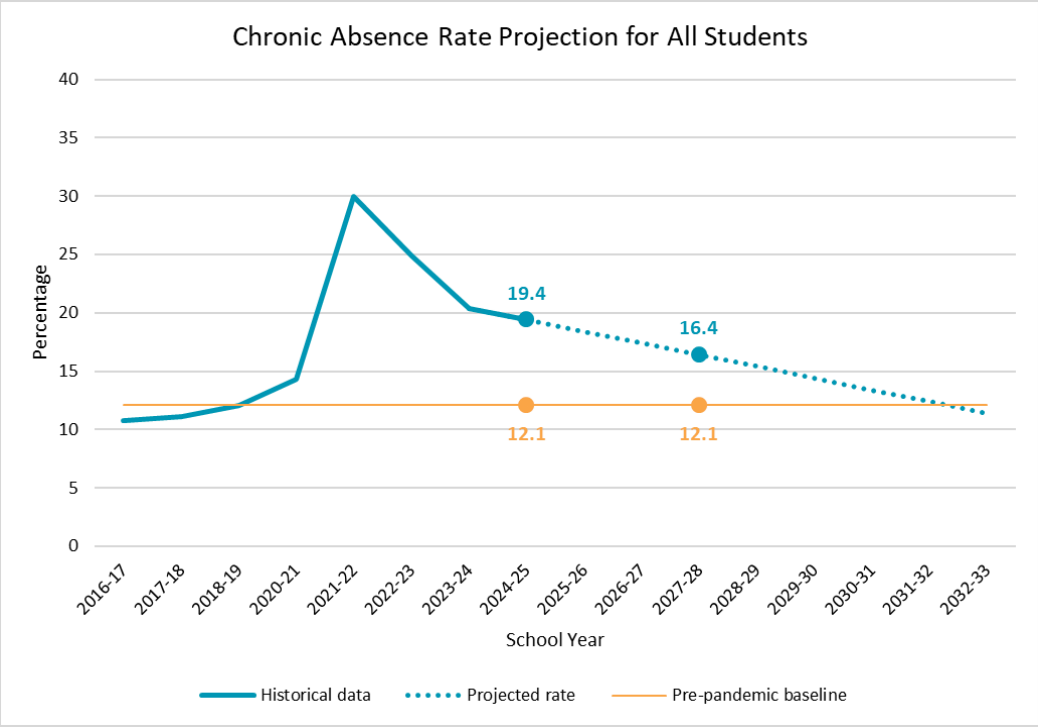
II. Projections: When the State Could Return to Pre-Pandemic Levels

Given prior trends in chronic absence, we wanted to understand when the state could expect to return to chronic absence levels last seen in 2018-19, when rates hovered at around 11%. This is important as it gives insight into the feasibility of making progress toward the state's 50% reduction goal and raises critical awareness towards the need to accelerate the pace of reductions to meet that goal.

In order to develop a set of projections for reductions in chronic absence, we considered prior declines in statewide chronic absence rates between the 2023-24 and 2024-25 school years and predicted how long it would take for chronic absence to return to their pre-pandemic baseline levels if those declines continued in the future. We developed projections for students overall and for student subgroups. Note that these projections are based on the status quo and assume that these historical declines persist in the future and that current efforts to reduce absenteeism remain constant, which may or may not hold true. We also assume a linear decline. Given uncertainty around trends in chronic absenteeism, rates could stagnate or decline more slowly or rapidly. While these are not definitive and should be interpreted with caution, they nonetheless offer one scenario for where absenteeism trends might be headed.

Statewide, if we expect a 1 percentage point annual decline in the chronic absence rate to persist in the future, the chronic absence rate is expected to return to its 2018-19 prepandemic level in the 2032-33 school year (Figure 4). By 2027-28, we predict that rates will have dropped to 16.4% and although the state will have made progress towards reducing chronic absence by 50%, rates will still be 4.3 percentage points above baseline. By 2030-31, the year when the state seeks to lower chronic absenteeism to 12.5%, rates will be 13.4%, still 0.9 percentage points above the baseline.

Figure 4



Reducing absences at the statewide level means that it will be important to see meaningful reductions among certain student groups, particularly among those comprising the largest share of the student population. Given this, we looked at reductions in two of the largest student groups: socioeconomically disadvantaged (SED) students (Figure 5) and Hispanic or Latino students (Figure 6). SED and Hispanic or Latino students make up 66% and 56% of the statewide student population, respectively. Based on these projections, the return to their 2018-19 levels for SED students would occur in the 2032-33 school year while for Hispanic and Latino students, the 2031-32 year. As with students overall, meaningful reductions would occur by 2027-28, but those reductions would only get the state part of the way towards the 50% reduction goal. Both SED and Hispanic and Latino students would still be about 5 percentage points above their baseline levels last seen in 2018-19.

Figure 5

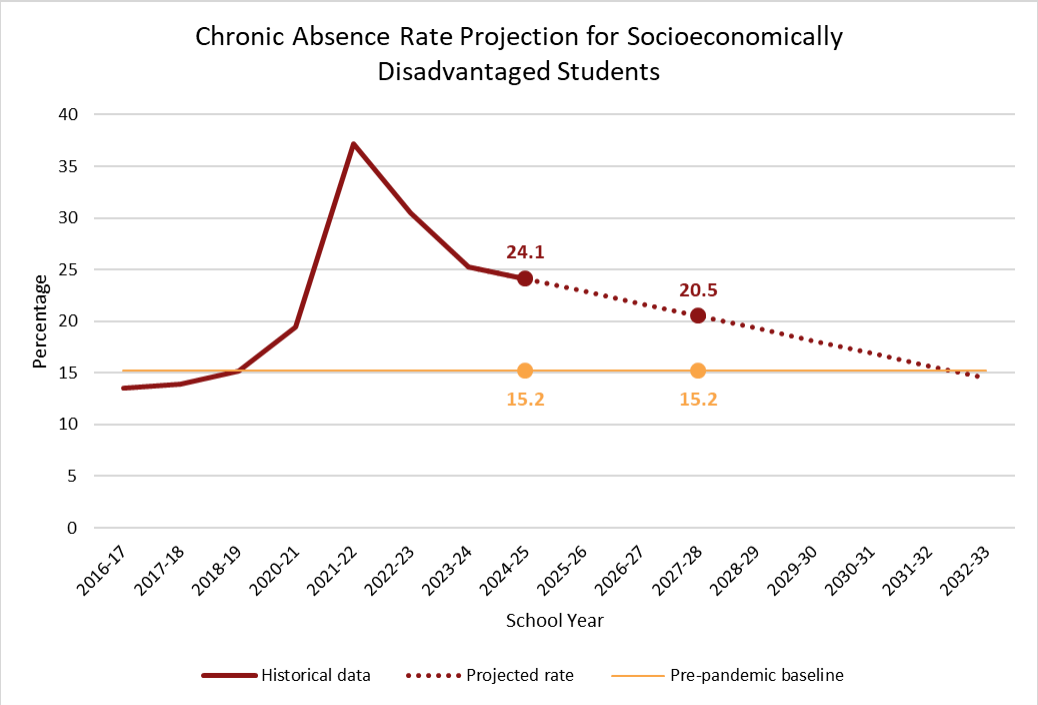
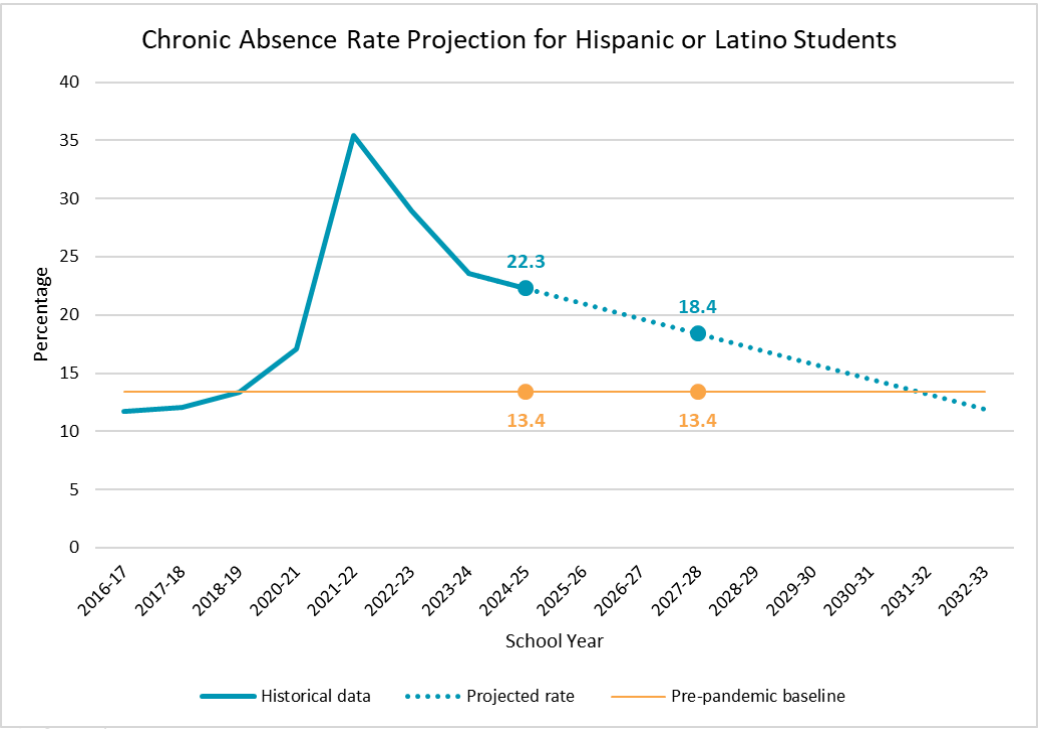


Figure 6



Meaningful declines in other groups are also important towards contributing to reductions in statewide chronic absence rates. Table 1 summarizes the expected annual changes and declines in chronic absence based on historical data alongside the year during which a return to the 2018-19 baseline is expected based on these historical trends. As shown, relative to their baseline levels alongside their historical declines, some groups will return to baseline more quickly than others. For instance, Filipino students are the first group expected to return to baseline by 2028-29 assuming a 0.9 pp annual decline, while for Pacific Islander students a return to baseline is anticipated by 2036-37.

Table 1. Chronic Absence Projections by Student Group

	Chronic Absence Rate 2024-25	Pre-Pandemic Baseline	Yearly Change	Projected Rate in 2027-28	Projected Year Meeting Goal	Number of Additional Students Chronically Absent in 2027-28
All	19.4	12.1	1.0	16.4	2032-33	253,851
Student Subgroup						
Socioeconomically Disadvantaged	24.1	15.2	1.2	20.5	2032-33	205,781
Students with Disabilities	27.7	19.5	1.3	23.8	2032-33	39,330
English Learners	21.3	12.5	1.5	16.8	2030-31	46,318
Foster Youth	37.3	27.7	-0.3	38.2	*	3,741
Homeless Youth	34.9	25.0	1.4	30.7	2032-33	16,721
Migrant Education	17.3	8.9	0.6	15.5	2038-39	3,536
Race/Ethnicity						
African American	31.3	22.5	1.0	28.3	2033-34	16,887
American Indian or Alaska Native	31.6	21.8	1.4	27.4	2031-32	1,413
Asian	8.1	4.3	0.5	6.6	2032-33	13,817
Filipino	9.1	6.2	0.9	6.4	2028-29	259
Hispanic or Latino	22.3	13.4	1.3	18.4	2031-32	165,494
Pacific Islander	31.3	20.2	1.0	28.3	2036-37	1,944
Two or More Races	16.5	11.0	0.8	14.1	2031-32	8,699
White	15.1	9.9	0.8	12.7	2031-32	32,890

Note. The color scale starts with green for earlier years and fewer students and ends with red for later years and more students. **Rate is increasing.*

The last column of Table 1 presents the number of additional students in 2027-28 projected to be chronically absent above the baseline rate. Importantly, these figures represent the reduction in chronically absent students that would be needed in order to fully return to baseline levels by 2027-28. For example, our projections indicate that the state would need to reduce the number of SED students who are chronically absent by an additional 206,000 in 2027-28 in order to return to a baseline level of 15.2% that year.

Based on these projections, while the state is moving towards reducing chronic absence, returning to 2018-19 baseline level will be slow and steady. Assuming historical declines hold constant (1 pp annually), returning to baseline will take another 7 years and for some key student groups, much longer (up to 10-11 years). Realistically, if the state is to meet the 50% reduction in the next by 2030, it will need to devise and implement a clear reduction strategy to ensure that schools and districts achieve larger declines than the historical 1 percentage point decline experienced between 2023-24 and 2024-25. There are already some encouraging signs of larger declines occurring at the school and district levels. Based on publicly available data from CDE, there were 4864 schools and 496 districts where chronic absenteeism rates dropped by more than 1 percentage point (roughly 49% of all schools and districts). These schools and districts could offer insight into ways to effectively push chronic absence rates further down. Also, since the overall statewide reduction is based on an average, certain groups may still experience increases or stagnation which are offset by larger decreases in other groups; however, this does not mean that groups who continue to struggle with school attendance should be overlooked. Given the downstream impacts of attendance on children's academic and social well-being, reducing rates should continue to be an important goal, particularly for vulnerable populations, like socioeconomically disadvantaged youth, foster youth, students with disabilities, youth experiencing homelessness, and students of color.

III. Reasons for Absences Among California's 9th and 11th Graders

Strategically reducing chronic absence not only requires an understanding of how future patterns may unfold but also underlying reasons why students miss school. Pinpointing particular reasons can help schools better allocate and target resources to reduce absences, especially towards addressing high prevalence reasons and reasons that have increased over time. At the same time, it is important to identify reasons that schools and districts can more readily address relative to those that require more coordinated and intensive interventions given existing resource capacity and constraints. From an equity standpoint, understanding disparities in reasons for attendance by student groups (e.g., by race and ethnicity) can shed light on what might be driving persistent disparities in absences, highlighting groups that will need more support in order to reduce those disparities. Accordingly, in this section of the report, we leverage data from the California Healthy Kids Survey (CHKS) to (1) describe reasons students reported for why they were absent, including how reasons correlate with each other, their prevalence, how they have changed over time, and differences by gender and race/ethnicity; and (2) determine whether the prevalence in reasons changed between the 2019-20 and 2023-24 school years.

Reasons for Absences: What We Know Drives Absences

Reasons for absences are multifaceted and often involve challenges faced by individual students (e.g., illness) and their families (e.g., parental work schedules) alongside broader structural challenges in the community (e.g., poverty) (Gottfried & Gee, 2017). Prior research on reasons that students report for being absent has found that illness is the most commonly reported reason (Diliberti et al., 2025; Gee et al., 2025). Recent analyses using data on K-12 students from Rhode Island (Gee et al., 2025) shows that certain systemic reasons, though low incidence, increased during the pandemic, including absences due to boredom and school safety, both of which are malleable aspects of schools. Such increases were particularly pronounced among high school students. Understanding reasons also is important due to the differential consequences of particular reasons on student achievement, especially those involving family crises or caregiving responsibilities. For example, students who were absent due to unforeseen family circumstances, like caring for a family member, as well as those absent due to family instability

(e.g., a domestic crisis) tend to have lower academic achievement relative to students who were absent due to illness or family vacations (Hancock et al., 2018; Havik et al., 2015).

Data

Our data comes from the California Healthy Kids Survey (CHKS), a large-scale statewide survey sponsored by the California Department of Education (CDE). The CHKS asks students to report on a wide range of experiences related to their schooling, health and overall wellbeing. The CDE requires districts to administer the survey to 7th and 9th graders, at a minimum, and districts also often administer the survey on a biennial basis to students in 5th and 11th grades as well. The survey is typically administered in fall (October to December) or spring (February to June). The survey question about reasons for absences was asked only of high school students, and thus we restrict our sample to 9th and 11th graders that responded to the CHKS. Our analyses are based on data from eight waves of the CHKS, spanning the 2015-16 to 2023-24 school years, which includes over 2.5 million 9th and 11th graders across all waves. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the 2020-21 survey captures responses from students who attended online and hybrid learning.

Measures

Reasons for Absence. Our primary measure of interest captures a student's reported reasons for why they missed school in the past 30 days. The CHKS questionnaire presents students with a list of 13 reasons and asks them to mark all reasons that apply (see Appendix for the survey question). In Table 2 below we organize the 13 reasons into 5 main categories.

Other Measures. In addition to data on reasons, we also use an identifier for a student's school alongside key self-reported demographic information, including students' gender and race/ethnicity.

Table 2. Reasons for Absences

Illness
Safety & Wellbeing
○ Bullied
○ Sad
○ Not enough sleep
○ Not safe
○ Alcohol or drugs
Family & Friends
○ Care for family or friends
○ Spend time with friends
Disengagement
○ Bored
○ Behind in schoolwork
Transportation

Data Strengths and Limitations

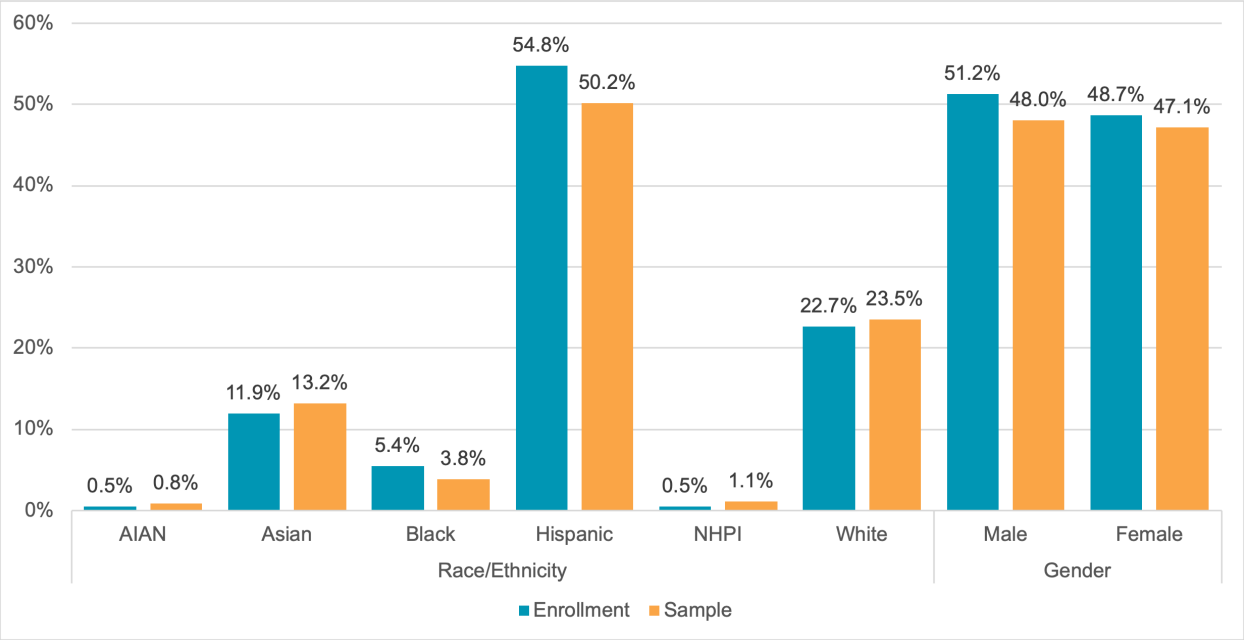
The CHKS is the only large-scale source of student self-reports about why they missed school. However, there are several limitations to note. First, given the self-report nature of the data, students may have been prone to over or underreporting certain reasons. Also, students only reported why they were absent in the past 30 days; thus, students may have reported a different set of reasons had the reporting window been much longer. Finally, in the 2020-21 school year, survey response rates were lower overall.

Sample Demographic Characteristics

Table A2 in the Appendix includes demographic information about the overall sample disaggregated by grade, parental education levels, race/ethnicity, and gender. By grade, 54% of students were in 9th and 46% were in 11th grade. By parental educational level, 41% of students had a parent who was a college graduate. Figure 7 shows the overall racial/ethnic and gender profile of the sample as compared to statewide enrollment data on 9th and 11th graders from the CDE. Relative to the state, the sample has lower percentages of Black students (3.8% vs. 5.4%), Hispanic students (50.2% vs. 54.8%) as well as

males (48% vs. 51.2%). Asian, Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander (NHPI), and White students are more highly represented in the sample relative to their representation in the state.

Figure 7. Sample Representation by Demographics (CHKS Sample vs. CDE Enrollment)



Note. AIAN = American Indian or Alaska Native; NHPI = Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander

Methods

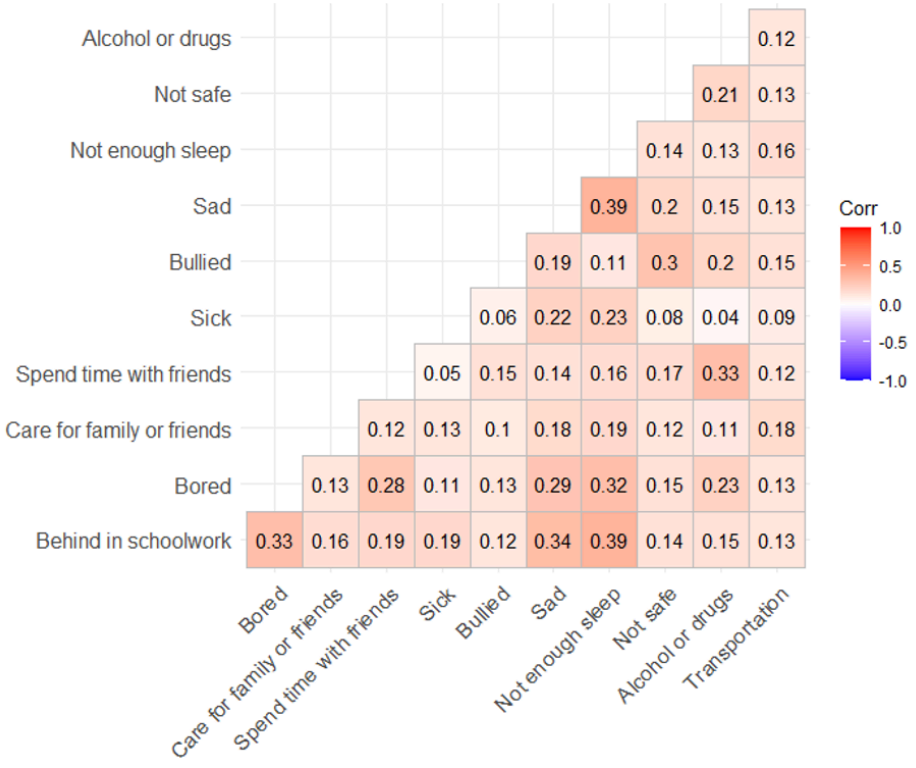
We used quantitative descriptive and correlational methods to understand patterns in attendance. We include more detailed information about our methodological approach in the Appendix.

Findings

Correlation Between Reasons. Figure 8 displays the correlations between the frequency of reported reasons. All reasons are positively correlated with each other meaning that, in general, as each reason is reported more frequently, so are each of the other reasons. Importantly, reasons that are reported together more frequently have higher correlation coefficient values that are closer to 1. Some of the strongest correlations are within the set of safety and wellbeing and reasons, including: sadness and not enough sleep (0.39) as well as bullied and not safe (0.30). Further, disengagement reasons were

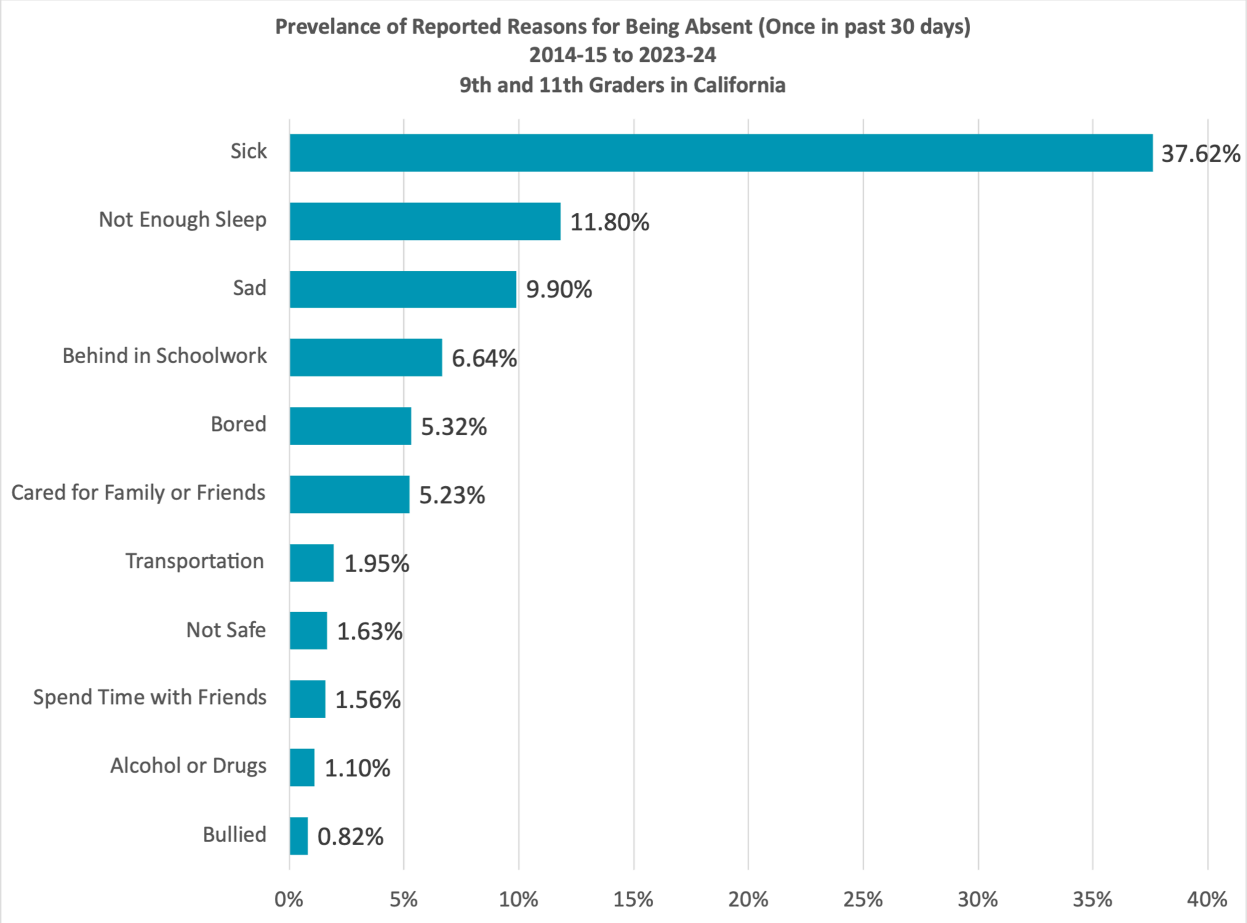
more strongly correlated with safety and wellbeing reasons, including: sadness and behind in schoolwork (0.34); and not enough sleep and behind in schoolwork (0.39). Finally, both disengagement reasons were more strongly correlated with each other: the correlation between behind in schoolwork and bored was 0.33.

Figure 8. Correlation Between Reasons



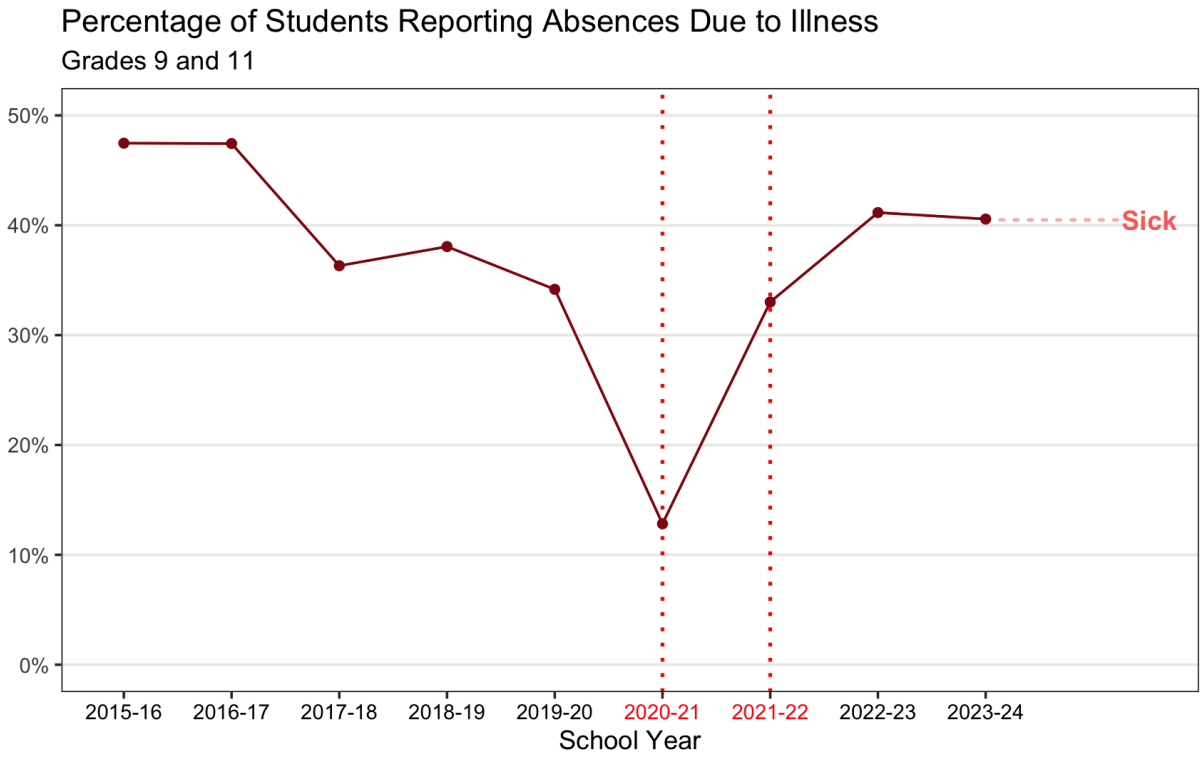
Prevalence of Reasons. As shown in Figure 9, aggregated results for 9th and 11th graders across all survey years show that illness was the most common reason for missing school, reported by close to 38% of students. This is followed by lack of sleep (12%) and sadness (10%). Disengagement reasons, including behind in schoolwork and boredom with school were reported by 7% and 5% of students, respectively. Less frequently reported reasons (< 2% of respondents) include transportation, safety concerns, spending time with friends, alcohol or drugs, and bullying.

Figure 9



Patterns Over Time. The prevalence of students reporting illness as a reason for missing school steadily declined in the years prior to the pandemic then steeply dropped in the 2020-21 school year to 13%, followed by a sharp rebound in 2021-22 to 33% (Figure 10). By 2023-24 rates rebounded to around 40%, just above their 2018-19 rates, but still below rates for 2015-16 and 2016-17. The appreciable dip in reports of missing school due to illness in 2020-21 may be due to the fact that students who were attending school remotely were still able to attend school despite being sick. Also, students may have had less outside contact which lowered their risk of becoming sick and remaining in better health.

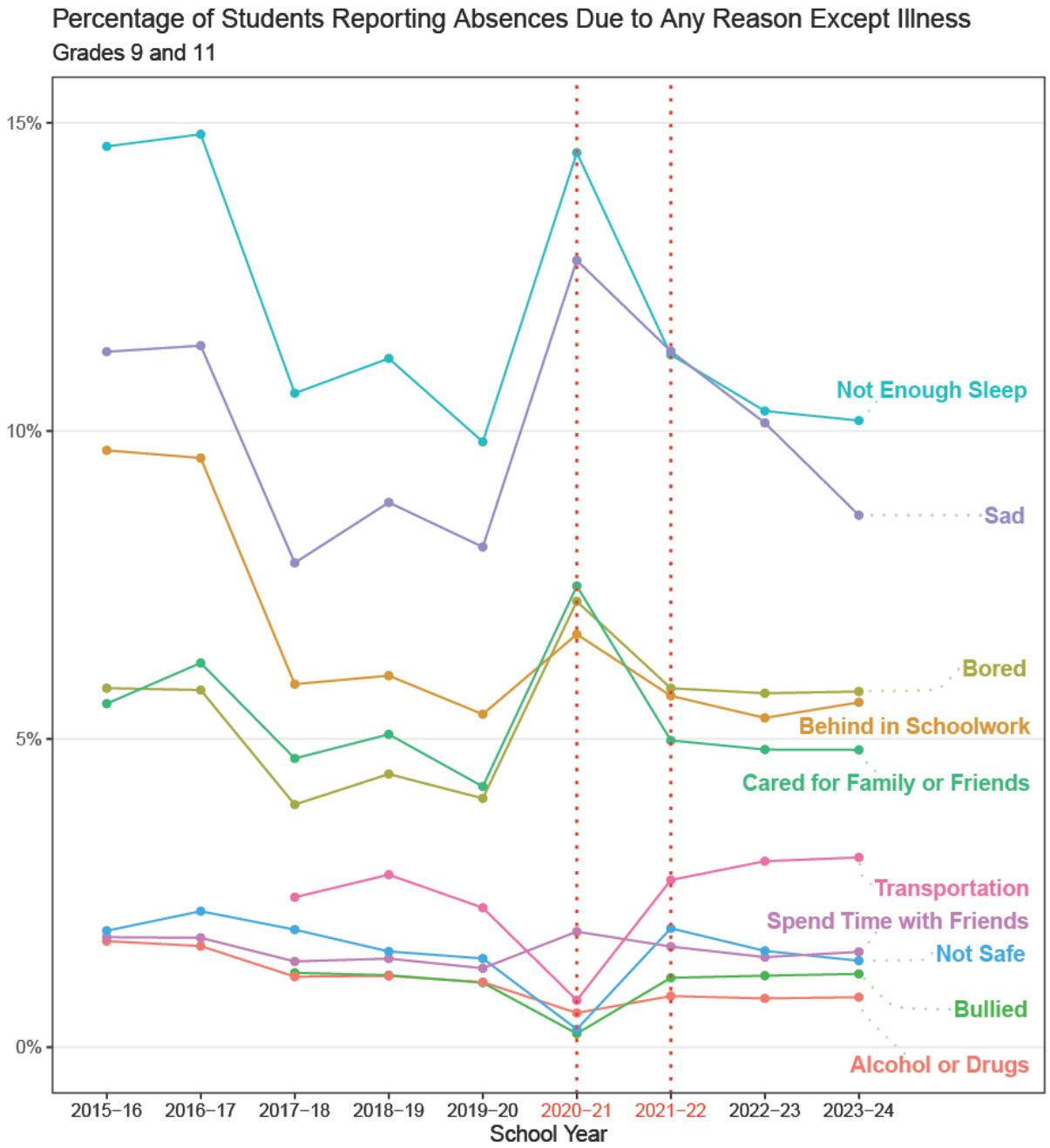
Figure 10



Note. The red vertical dotted lines represent the school years that were impacted by COVID-19.

When looking at trends over time (Figure 11) for reasons other than illness, behavioral reasons increased sharply in the initial COVID impact year (2020-21) followed by a post-COVID decline starting in 2021-22. There were notable spikes in students reporting absences due to not enough sleep, sadness, boredom, and caring for family or friends in the 2020-21 school year. As expected, reasons related to attending school in-person (transportation, safety and bullying) all declined in the COVID-impact year, and when students returned to in person schooling those reasons rebounded.

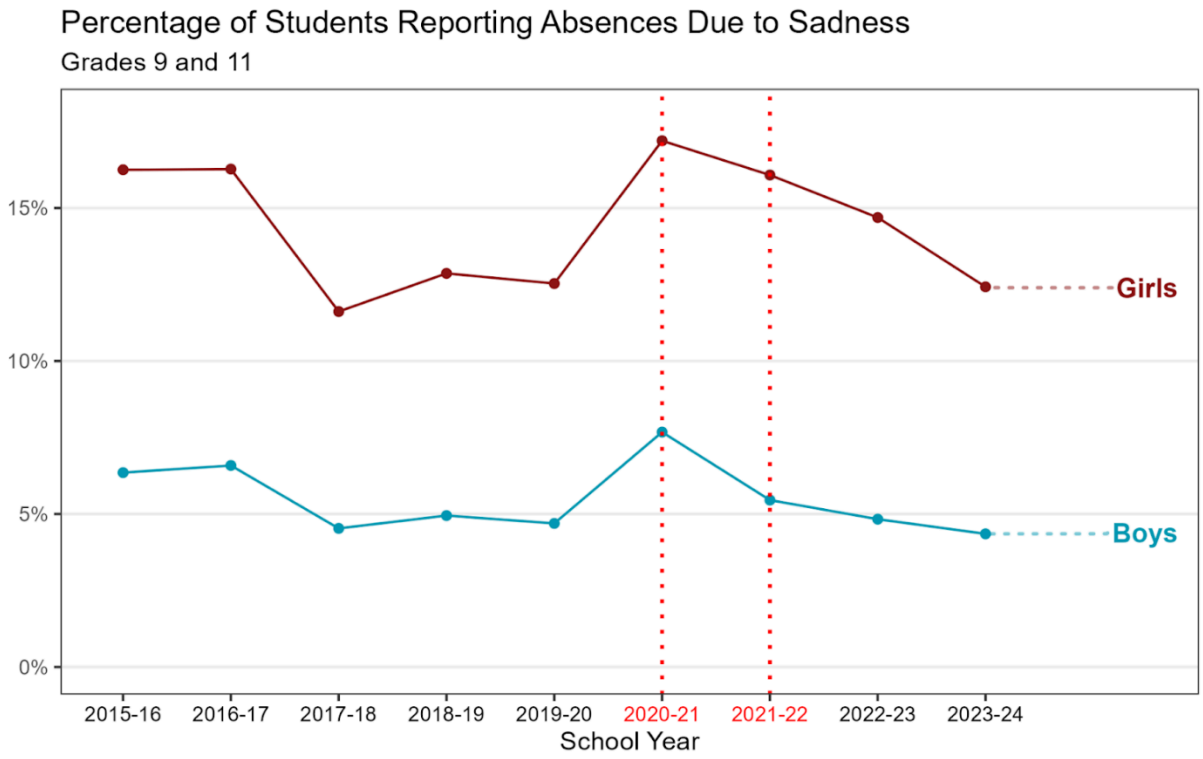
Figure 11



In the next sections, we examine how reasons over time differ by gender and race/ethnicity. Our prior investigation of absence reasons shows unique gender and racial/ethnic gaps (Gee et al., 2025) that could be underlying differential attendance patterns and highlights for whom more targeted approaches might be necessary to reduce certain kinds of absences.

Patterns by Gender. There are notable gender gaps in reports of missing school due to sadness, lack of sleep and caring for family or friends, with girls more frequently reporting these reasons relative to boys. The largest gap is for reports of missing school due to sadness (Figure 12). This gap increased during the pandemic, reaching a peak in 2021-22 when nearly three times as many girls reported sadness as a reason for missing school versus boys (16% vs. 5%). This gap eventually narrowed by 2023-24 (12% vs. 4%) and was mainly due to a steeper decrease in rates for girls after 2021-22.

Figure 12



Reports of caring for family or friends (Figure 13) followed a similar trend—in the 2020-21 school year the gender gap increased (9% for girls vs. 6% for boys) with the gap eventually narrowing by 2023-24 (5.5% vs. 4%). Finally, compared to girls, boys more frequently report missing school due to alcohol or drugs (Figure 14). In particular, in the 2023-24 school year, rates of reporting an absence for alcohol or drugs was 0.9% for boys, and for girls it was 0.4%.

Figure 13

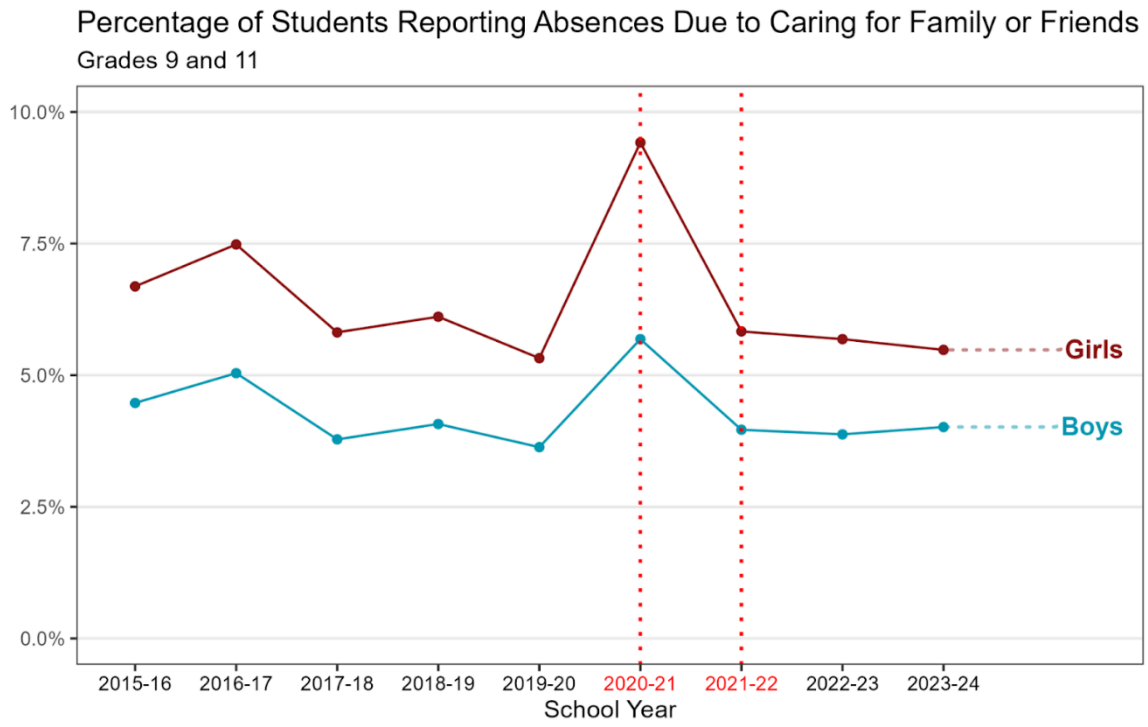
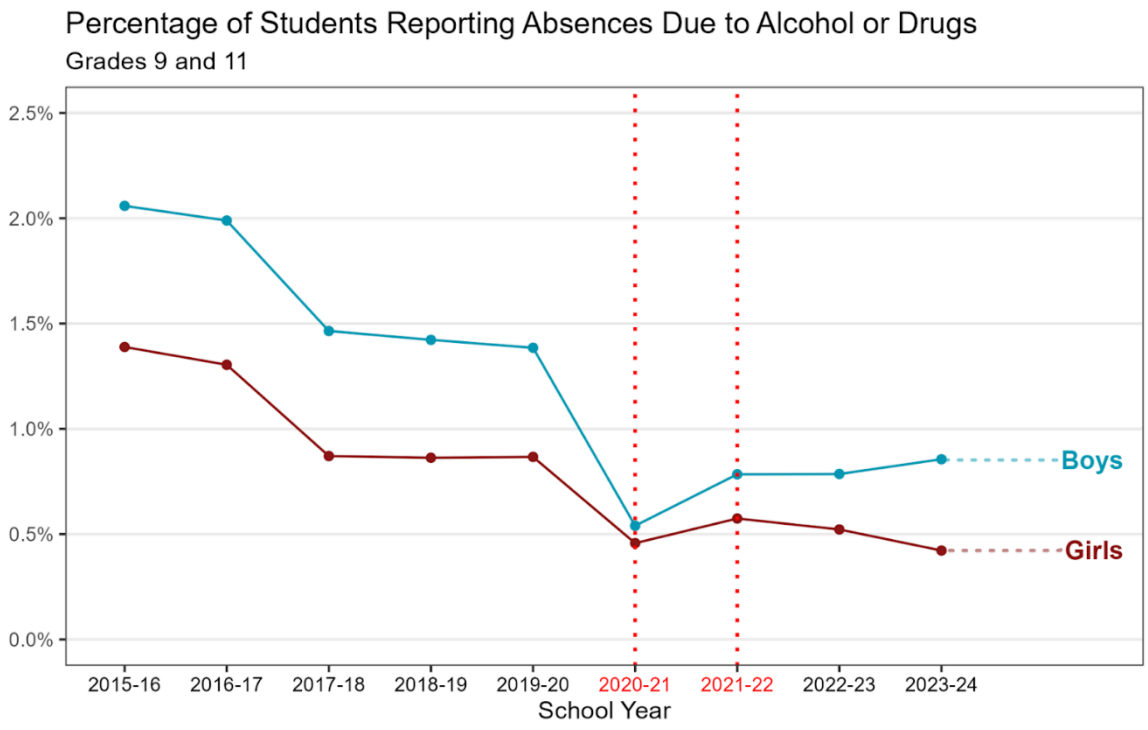
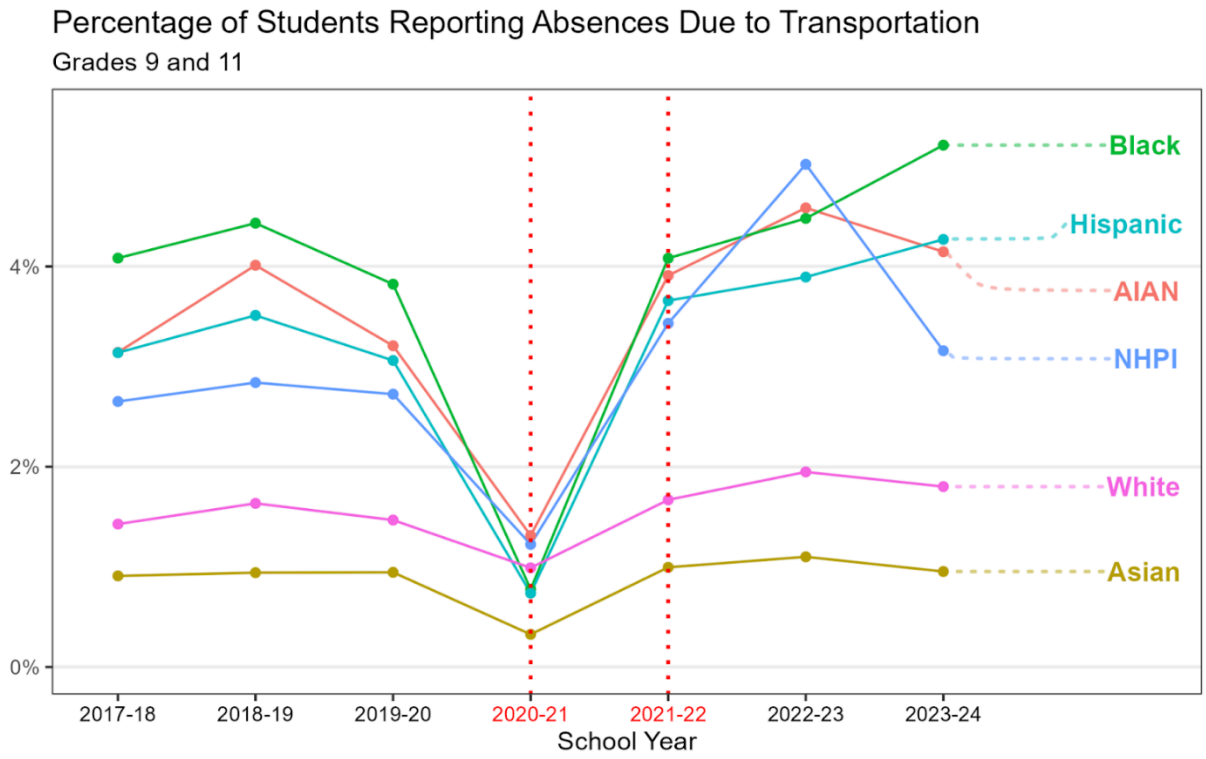


Figure 14



Patterns by Race and Ethnicity. There are some noteworthy racial and ethnic disparities in reported reasons. While transportation is a relatively low prevalence reason (< 2% overall) there were clear racial and ethnic disparities that narrowed during the pandemic but then re-emerged when schools resumed in-person (Figure 15). In particular, rates for Black students reporting transportation as a reason for missing school fell below White counterparts (about 0.3 percentage points lower) in 2020-21; however, rates increased to 5.2%, nearly 3.5 percentage points higher versus White students in 2023-24.

Figure 15



A similar pattern exists for safety concerns with a narrowing of racial and ethnic gaps during the initial year of the pandemic and then increasing again by 2023-24 (Figure 16). On the other hand, gaps in missing school due to caring for family or friends widened during the pandemic (Figure 17). For example, 13.5% of NHPI students reported caring for family or friends in 2020-21, nearly 9 percentage points higher than that of White students (4.6%). Since then, rates have narrowed and the NHPI-White gap in 2023-24 was roughly 5 percentage points.

Figure 16

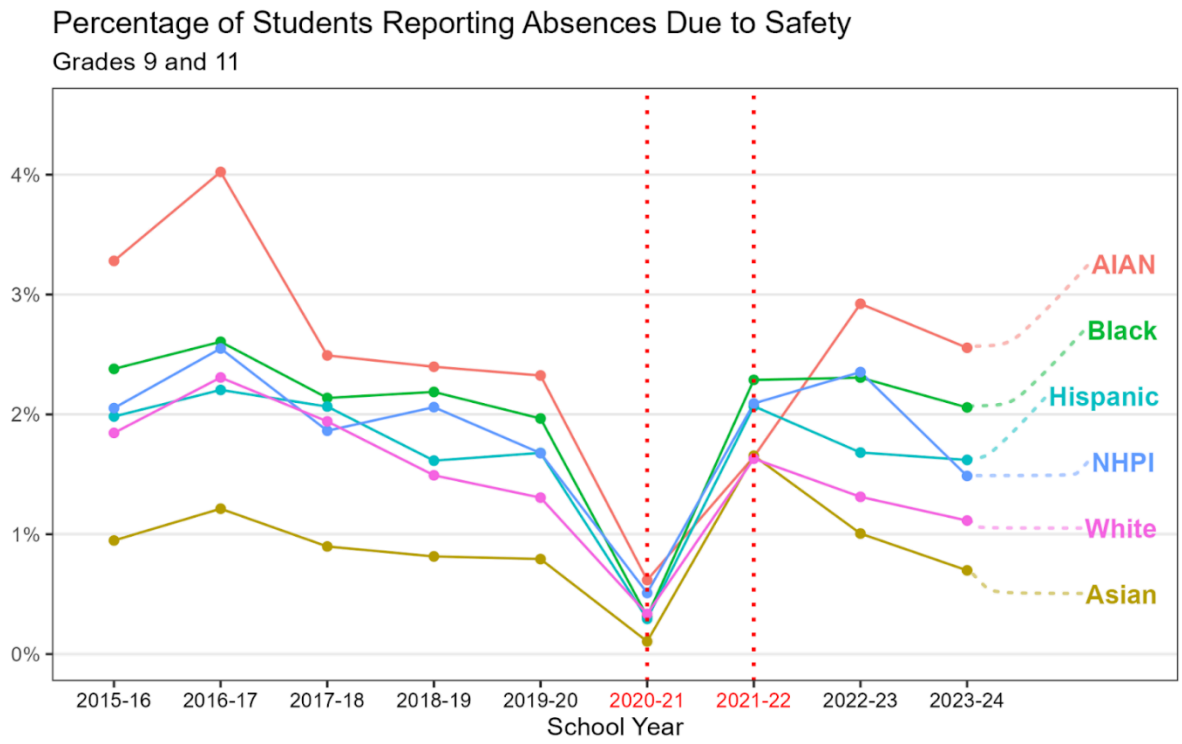
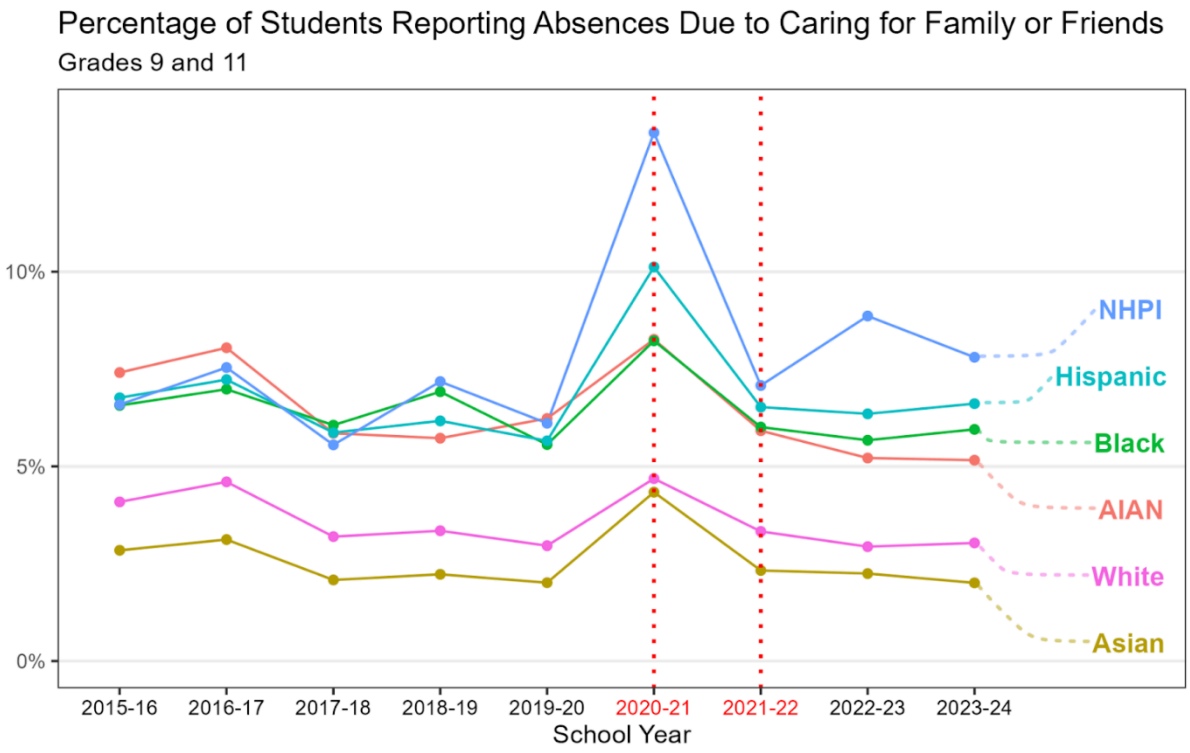


Figure 17



How Reasons Changed Before and After the Pandemic. When comparing the prevalence of reasons before (2019-20) and after (2023-24) the pandemic (Table 3), the largest significant increase occurred among students reporting being absent due to illness (a 7.3 percentage point increase), followed by boredom (1.64 pp). Reasons related to family obligations and friends also increased, albeit at a much smaller magnitude (0.52 pp for caring for family or friends and 0.31 for spending time with friends). Among the safety and well-being reasons, there was a small uptick in students reporting being bullied and sadness. Similarly, missing school due to transportation increased by 0.76 points. Finally, the prevalence of students missing school due to being behind in schoolwork, not enough sleep and safety remained similar before and after the pandemic.

Table 3. Change in Reported Reasons for Absences (2019-20 vs. 2023-24)

	Prevalence in 2019-20 (percent)	Change from 2019-20 to 2023-24 (percentage points)		95% CI		*p*-value
Illness	34.2%	7.30	▲	5.98	8.63	0.00
Disengagement						
Behind in Schoolwork	5.4%	0.12	-	-0.17	0.42	0.42
Bored	4.0%	1.64	▲	1.41	1.87	0.00
Family Obligations and Friends						
Cared for Family or Friends	4.2%	0.52	▲	0.31	0.72	0.00
Spend Time with Friends	1.3%	0.31	▲	0.20	0.41	0.00
Safety and Wellbeing						
Bullied	1.0%	0.16	▲	0.08	0.25	0.00
Sad	8.1%	0.53	▲	0.17	0.89	0.00
Not Enough Sleep	9.8%	0.26	-	-0.15	0.67	0.22
Not Safe	1.4%	0.00	-	-0.21	0.22	0.98
Alcohol or Drugs	1.1%	-0.21	▼	-0.29	-0.12	0.00
Transportation	2.3%	0.76	▲	0.61	0.91	0.00
N	260,302					

Note. Results based on linear probability models with school fixed effects; 95% CIs based on standard errors clustered by school.

Limitations

There are several limitations that are important to keep in mind when interpreting these results. These results are based on a self-selected group of students who responded to the CHKS survey and although the sample is fairly representative of the overall population of 9th and 11th graders in the state, particular groups were more or less represented in the sample, especially Asian students (over-represented) and Hispanic students (under-represented). Also, the survey question about reasons did not include an open-ended response option and there may have been other important reasons not captured in the survey. Finally, given the wording of the question, we are unable to capture how many absences are associated with each reported reason. Given these limitations, we recommend that future surveys about reasons be expanded to include an open-ended response option as well as capture more detailed information about the frequency with which students report these reasons during the school year.

Summary and Implications

Through our analysis of reasons that California's 9th and 11th graders reported for being absent in the 2015-16 through 2023-24 waves of the California Healthy Kids Survey (CHKS), we found that illness and lack of sleep were the most common reasons for missing school in the past 30 days. Post-COVID increases were more prominent in reports of absences due to illness and boredom. We also found disparate patterns by race/ethnicity and gender which could point to why inequities in absences continue to persist. Notable disparities exist between Black and White students, with Black students reporting higher rates of being absent due to transportation relative to their White peers. In terms of gender, girls report higher rates of absences due to sadness and caregiving for family and friends relative to boys.

Although we are unable to draw any definitive conclusions about the degree to which these reasons are contributing to the state's ongoing chronic absence problem, they do point to a series of malleable reasons that can be addressed by districts and schools who may be seeking to prevent or reduce particular kinds of absences. Higher rates of absences due to illness and lack of sleep suggest that

supporting school health is a worthwhile strategy to invest in, including the support of school nurses and psychologists. The post-pandemic increase in boredom could be signaling increasing disengagement from school which can be overcome, in part, with strategic investments in ensuring that school is a place where students feel engaged in the curriculum and part of the broader school community. We also found that certain types of absences are more highly interrelated with each other. Absences due to disengagement more highly correlate with absences related to safety and wellbeing, suggesting that reasons for missing school could be reinforcing each other and, thus, addressing these kinds of reasons might require multipronged approaches. We address more specific solutions to absenteeism in the final section of this report.

Finally, while these findings are specific to the California students who responded to the CHKS, there are some striking similarities in findings about reasons in a recent study of Rhode Island students (Gee et al., 2025). These similarities could be signals of broader trends occurring in other states. For instance, in terms of the rank ordering of reasons, both California 9th and 11th graders and high school students in Rhode Island (9-12th graders) report illness at the highest rate followed by lack of sleep. Further, there were relatively comparable proportions of students reporting absences due to not doing homework in Rhode Island (8.8%) and students who were behind in schoolwork in California (6.6%). In terms of lower incident reasons, like California students, Rhode Island students less frequently report missing school due to safety and bullying. Given a consistent pattern of higher rates of absences due to illness and lack of sleep in both Rhode Island and California, these findings provide some preliminary clues about the kinds of absences that might also be disproportionately contributing to higher rates of chronic absence in other states.

IV. Solutions to Chronic Absence

Undoubtedly, no silver bullet exists to reduce chronic absenteeism. Reducing absences is heavily context dependent, both in terms of who is experiencing absence and the resource capacity available to address their specific needs. Below we offer a summary of the latest evidence on what works to reduce chronic absenteeism. We draw upon strategies and evidence in Future Ed's Attendance Playbook (Jordan, 2023) and first review interventions that could potentially help students overcome

some of the key reasons that students reported for absences in our analysis of CHKS data. We end with a set of broader holistic strategies, some of which are currently being implemented across the state.

Interventions Aligned with Key Reasons for Absences

Illness. Addressing absences due to illness could include strategies to support student nutrition and health. Some practices linked to improved attendance include school meal programs (Trajkovski et al., 2023), particularly those that serve breakfast in the classroom (Anzman-Frasca et al., 2015; Kirksey & Gottfried, 2021), and school vaccination programs (Keck et al., 2013; Plaspohl et al., 2013).

Disengagement. Disengagement-related absences can be mitigated by improving school climate, such as creating welcoming and affirming environments, especially through curriculum that reflects students' backgrounds and cultures. For example, Dee & Penner (2017) demonstrated that students in San Francisco Unified School District who were exposed to ethnic studies curriculum had higher attendance. Afterschool programs in the Oakland Unified School District have also been linked with improved attendance (Public Profit, 2011). Finally, evidence has shown that summer learning (Lynch et al., 2025), and the presence of mentors (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2018), have also strong ties to increases in attendance.

Safety. A study by McMillen et al. (2019) showed that providing safety monitors from the community during school arrivals and dismissals in Chicago public schools lead to increased attendance.

Transportation. Transportation can be a primary barrier to school attendance, especially among students in rural areas and among families where there are safety concerns with walking to school or relying on public transportation. School-managed bus services can help alleviate these issues and are associated with increased attendance (Edwards, 2023; Gottfried, 2017).

Broader Strategies

Finally, there are four other strategies that have been shown to be associated with declines in chronic absence.

Family Engagement. Family engagement strategies involve a range of approaches that at their core, rely on ensuring that schools establish and sustain close connections with families. Connections can take many forms and vary in their frequency, duration and intensity. The more intensive in-person engagement approaches include home visitation programs, while light touch engagement can include informational "nudges" via text messaging, where parents receive a text message from the school informing them of their child's attendance. These messages are associated with increased attendance (Rogers & Feller, 2018; Smythe-Leistico & Page, 2018) and have been shown to be effective in 10 school districts in California located in a demographically diverse county (Robinson et al., 2018).

Community Schools. Community schools rely on an integrated support model that holistically supports the needs of students, beyond just academics to include health and social services alongside youth and community development services. Swain and colleagues (2025) found that community schools in California reduced chronic absenteeism, and reductions were greater for historically underserved students.

Early Warning Systems. Using a set of indicators, such as attendance, achievement, and behavioral issues, early warning systems identify students who are at-risk of becoming chronically absent and may require additional support. Faria et al. (2017) found that an early warning system reduced chronic absenteeism by 4 percentage points.

Incentives. While incentives—particularly financial incentives—are a commonplace way to promote attendance, several studies show no significant impact of these kinds of incentives on attendance (Allan & Fryer, 2011; Fryer, 2011; Riccio et al., 2010; Riccio et al., 2013). Since the evidence supporting use of student incentives is limited, we recommend caution in relying solely on incentives to promote

attendance. If incentives are part of a broader strategy to increase attendance, then we recommend relying on a four-part framework for implementing incentives (Balu & Ehrlich, 2018):

- Identify the specific attendance problems that need to be solved.
- Select an appropriate incentive to address the problem and change the behavior.
- Consider the tradeoffs of the incentive in terms of how impactful it is relative to the cost.
- Evaluate how effective the incentive has been and adjust if needed.

In selecting solutions, it is important that they are viewed as part of a broader holistic strategy that aligns with underlying root causes driving absences. As such, an important first step in tackling chronic absence is to understand underlying drivers. When considering solutions, schools and districts should also keep in mind strategies that have the potential to address more than just absenteeism alone, especially ways to increase both absenteeism and achievement. Finally, solutions have varying levels of costs and benefits and schools operating under resource-constrained conditions will need to balance costs with potential benefits.

Conclusion

Chronic absenteeism continues to be a challenge across California and while the state is headed in the right direction, declines in chronic absence over the last two school years have slowed considerably jeopardizing progress towards reducing chronic absence to their pre-pandemic levels. Nearly half a decade after the pandemic ended and students returned to in-person schooling, rates remain around 19%, nearly double pre-pandemic levels. Given the positive impact that attendance has on students' academic learning and development, further accelerating reductions in chronic absenteeism remains a key priority across the state and will require a clear strategy built on solid evidence. This includes an understanding of who is most at risk of experiencing chronic absence, drivers of absences, and solutions to absenteeism.

Making progress in reducing chronic absenteeism is possible but it has become more challenging due to the increasing role of systemic and sometimes unpredictable threats, including the role of climate change alongside recent trends in immigration enforcement. However, there are particular bright spots

occurring in the state and a statewide network improvement network, Raising Attendance and Improving Student Engagement (RAISE), that is helping reduce chronic absenteeism through a unique network improvement community approach.

The state, in partnership with Attendance Works, has also developed a comprehensive California Attendance Guide to improve attendance and engagement (California Department of Education, 2025). The guide emphasizes the importance of supporting students' health, well-being, and safety while at the same time ensuring that families actively engage with schools. The guide also offers district and school leaders with a range of guidance, encouraging them to: leverage data to match resources to students needing support; invest in programs like Expanding Learning and Community Schools; and promote a problem-solving, solutions-oriented approach built on mutual respect for and engagement with families.

Looking ahead, we also offer several guiding principles when solving chronic absence:

1. **Attendance and Achievement Go Hand in Hand.** The value of school attendance is only as good as the quality of education that children receive when they are present. Thus, attendance strategies need to also be considered in the context of investments in high quality classroom instruction. This also means moving beyond diagnosing and treating absences in isolation and, instead, looking at absences and its solutions in the context of other important outcomes like achievement and socio-emotional well-being.
2. **Shifting the Perception of Schools.** There may have been a fundamental shift in the perceptions of schooling's value by both parents and students (Malkus, 2026). If true, then schools and districts should be thinking critically about how to make schooling valuable again to the lives and futures of students. One way is by focusing on pull-in factors like engaging curricular experiences, both during and after school.
3. **A Continued Focus on Vulnerable Student Groups.** While some groups account for a small share of the total student population, students like those experiencing homelessness and foster youth can easily get overlooked in a broader chronic absence reduction strategy. These groups may need stronger support and assistance, especially through advocates and liaisons, who can

connect them and their families with a broader set of resources and strategies than what schools are currently able to provide.

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Appendix

Table A1. Pre- vs. Post-Pandemic Chronic Absence Rates by Student Group

	Chronic Absence Rate 2024-25	Chronic Absence Rate 2018-19	Change	# of Chronically Absent Students in 2024-25
All	19.4	12.1	7.3	1,143,668
Student Subgroup				
Socioeconomically Disadvantaged	24.1	15.2	8.9	937,565
Students with Disabilities	27.7	19.5	8.2	253,246
English Learners	21.3	12.5	8.8	229,682
Foster Youth	37.3	27.7	9.6	13,278
Homeless Youth	34.9	25.0	9.9	102,268
Migrant Education	17.3	8.9	8.4	9,279
Race/Ethnicity				
African American	31.3	22.5	8.8	91,217
American Indian or Alaska Native	31.6	21.8	9.8	7,981
Asian	8.1	4.3	3.8	48,833
Filipino	9.1	6.2	2.9	11,807
Hispanic or Latino	22.3	13.4	8.9	739,261
Pacific Islander	31.3	20.2	11.1	7,512
Two or More Races	16.5	11.0	5.5	46,255
White	15.1	9.9	5.2	177,670

Table A2. Sample Descriptive Statistics

	Percent
Grade	
9th	54.1
11th	45.9
Parent Education Level	
Some high school	13.9
High school graduate	16.2
Some college	12.5
College graduate	41.0
Don't know	13.4
N/A	3.0
Race/Ethnicity	
American Indian or Alaska Native	0.8
Black or African American	3.8
Asian or Asian American	13.2
Hispanic or Latinx	50.2
Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander	1.1
White	23.5
Gender	
Male	48.0
Female	47.1
N	2,545,732

Note. Source: California Health Kids Survey (2015-16 to 2023-24). The racial and ethnic categories are from the CHKS survey. Percentages may not add to 100 due to rounding.

Absence Reason Question from the CHKS

The CHKS High School Questionnaire (Core Module) asks students "In the past 30 days did you miss a day of school for any of the following reasons? (Mark All That Apply):

A. Does not apply; I didn't miss any school
B. Illness (feeling physically sick), including problems with breathing or your teeth
C. Were being bullied or mistreated at school
D. Felt very sad, hopeless, anxious, stressed, or angry
E. Didn't get enough sleep

F. Didn't feel safe at school or going to and from school
G. Had to take care of or help a family member or friend
H. Wanted to spend time with friends
I. Used alcohol or drugs
J. Were behind in schoolwork or weren't prepared for a test of class assignment
K. Were bored or uninterested in school
L. Had no transportation to school
M. Other

Methodology. We used correlation analysis to examine how reasons are interrelated to each other. Then, we generated descriptive statistics (percentages) to describe patterns in the prevalence, overall and over time, for reasons that students report for why they were absent.

To estimate whether the prevalence changed before and after the pandemic, we used regression analysis where we regressed a binary measure of whether a student endorsed the reason (coded as 1 = yes; 0 = no) on a binary variable capturing the year (coded as 1 for 2023-24 school year; 0 for the 2019-20 school year). We included school fixed effects and clustered our standard errors by school. More formally, we fit the following linear probability model to data for student *i* in school *s* in year *t* as follows:

$$Y_{ist} = B_0 + B_1(Post_{ist}) + a_s + e_{ist}$$

Where Y_{ist} represents each reason, B_1 captures the difference in the prevalence of the reason between 2019-20 and 2023-24 while a_s is a fixed effect for school which accounts for time-stable factors, both observed and unobserved, that vary between schools, and e_{ist} is the error term which we clustered by school.