

A LOOK AT CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM

As COVID-19 upended the lives of students around the state, schools across Wisconsin saw a troubling increase in chronic absences. Moreover, the highest rates of absenteeism occurred in schools with greater numbers of students of color and from low-income households, thus posing an additional threat to efforts to bridge the state’s longstanding achievement gaps for these K-12 students.

Wisconsin’s K-12 schools reported a sharp increase in absenteeism in the 2020-21 school year (referred to in this brief as 2021), a worrisome COVID-19 trend that could negatively affect students and districts for years to come. Although an increase in absences is expected during any pandemic due to sick days and quarantines for students, it is worth considering both its impacts and potential responses.

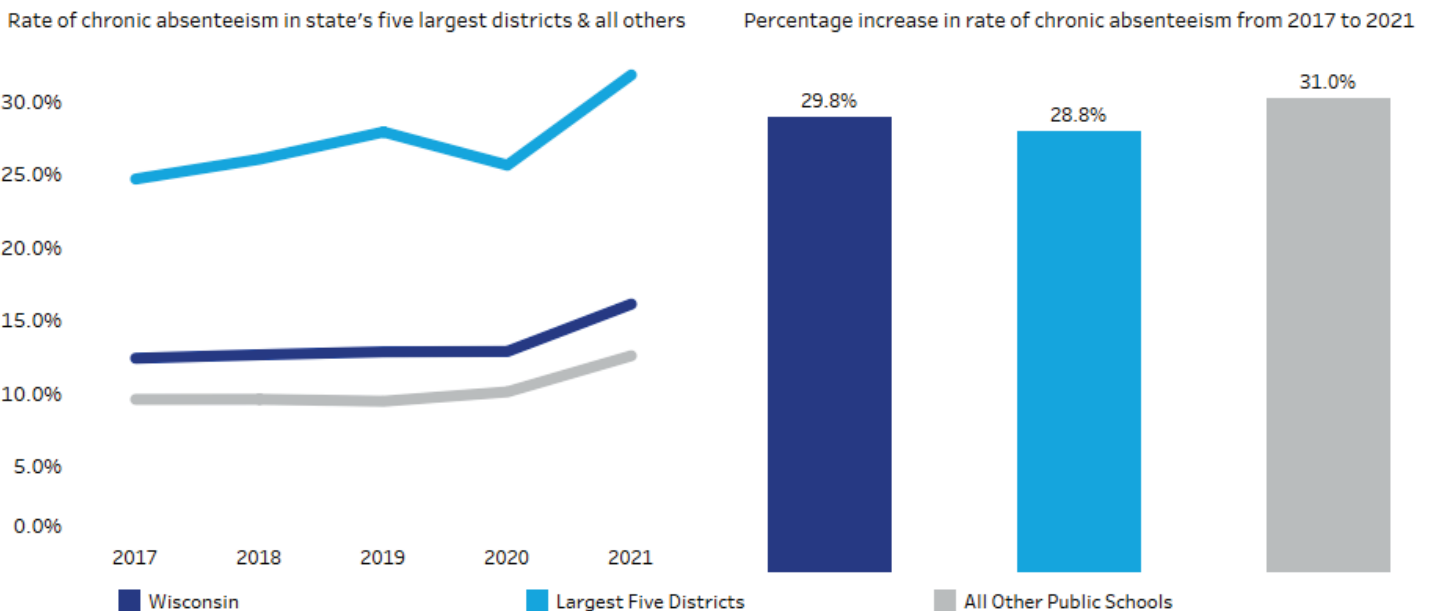
In 2017, 12.4% of the state’s public school students were identified as chronically absent, but by 2021 that number had risen to 16.1%. We have yet to see if chronic absenteeism remained elevated during the 2022 school year or if the numbers decreased as the effects of the pandemic receded. The 2021 school year represents the most recent year for which [statewide](#)

[data](#) on absenteeism are available from the Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (DPI).

Research has tied high rates of chronic absenteeism to lower student achievement, decreased student mental health, higher dropout rates, and more challenges in adulthood. Most concerning, we find that absenteeism was highest in schools with large shares of students from low-income households and students of color – groups that already face challenges in school.

Two basic factors led to the increase in this percentage: a rise in the number of chronically absent students and a drop in the overall number of enrolled students. From 2017 to 2021, the number of chronically absent students rose by 23,924 students (from 99,969 to 123,893), an increase of 23.9%. Simultaneously, in this

Figure 1: Chronic Absences Rise Across Wisconsin



Source: Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction



dataset the number of students enrolled in public schools decreased by 4.5%, from 804,031 to 767,666.

DEFINING ABSENTEEISM

Since 2019, chronically absent students have been defined in Wisconsin as those who have missed more than 10% of possible school days. This calculation only includes those students who were enrolled for at least 90 days of the school year and includes both excused and unexcused reported absences.

This methodology is more stringent than the guidelines prior to 2019, which identified students who missed at least 16% of possible school days as chronically absent. The updated state definition now matches the federal definition of chronic absenteeism, and DPI has recalculated the values prior to 2019 so that year-over-year comparisons are possible.

The pandemic, however, introduced difficulties for comparing 2021 to other years. Although the definition of chronic absenteeism remained consistent in 2021, the definition of an absence did not. Reported numbers of absences may be underestimates because districts had varying, and oftentimes less strict or at least different, guidelines for taking attendance.

First, districts around the state and country had differing levels of virtual schooling in 2021, ranging from little to none in more rural parts of Wisconsin to much or even most of the academic year for some urban districts. In virtual settings, the rules varied for taking attendance. To be marked present, a student may have needed to actively participate in class, show up on camera, or just log into a virtual classroom.

In the transition period to hybrid and in-person settings, the methods for determining absences became even more complex and inconsistent across districts. For example, when schools returned to in-person lessons, DPI gave guidance but also leeway to individual districts on how they reported district-mandated quarantines. One district might count as present a student who completed the given assignments while at home due to a positive COVID test or exposure to COVID, but another district might have a different policy in place. Such variation means that reported numbers may well underestimate the true number of students who habitually missed school.

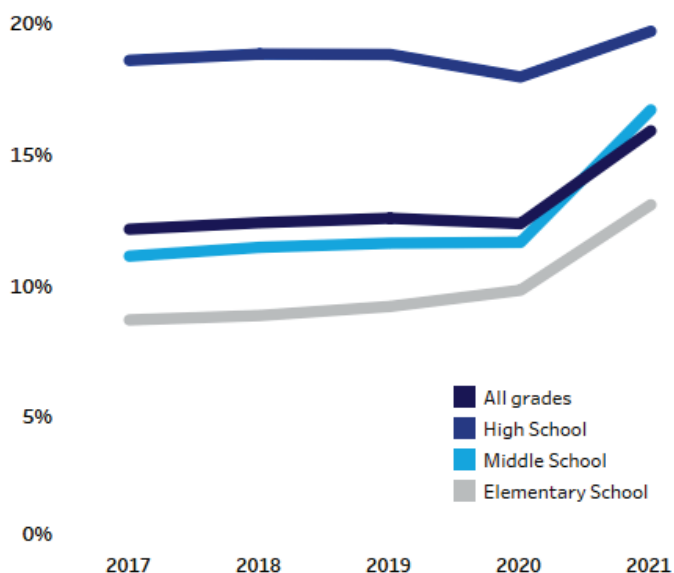
WHERE CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM GREW MORE SHARPLY

A large portion of chronically absent students in Wisconsin are in the state's largest districts. The five largest districts had a collective absentee rate of 31.8% in 2021, while all other districts and schools had a rate of 12.6% (see Figure 1 on page 1).

Yet those large districts are not solely driving the state's increase. The state's five largest districts experienced an increase of 28.8% in their absentee rate from 2017 to 2021. The collective rate for all other districts in Wisconsin increased by 31.0% during that same period – a slightly larger rise in percentage terms.

With regard to grade level, Wisconsin's high school students have historically had the highest rates of absenteeism, and this trend continued during the pandemic. Yet, examining the percentage increase in these rates again broadens our focus, as levels of absenteeism among younger students increased more sharply than those for high school students after the arrival of COVID-19 (see Figure 2). Students in all age groups – elementary, middle, and high school – were more frequently absent in 2021, but middle school students had the largest increase in their rate, which rose from 11.7% to 16.7%.

Figure 2: Chronic Absences Rise Most In Middle School
Rate of chronic absenteeism in Wisconsin by grade level and year



Source: Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction



ABSENTEEISM GREATER AMONG DISADVANTAGED GROUPS

We were also interested in gauging chronic absenteeism among certain student demographic groups. The chronic absenteeism dataset by itself does not break out student characteristics, so instead we examined attendance data and DPI-issued annual report cards for the 2,076 schools in the state for which both are available.

First, we found that schools with higher rates of absenteeism generally have more students from low-income households. In 2021, schools with absentee rates below 5% collectively had 28.7% of their students categorized as economically disadvantaged, whereas at schools with absentee rates above 25%, 69.1% of the students were from low-income households.

Schools with higher rates of absenteeism also generally serve a larger share of students of color. In schools with absentee rates below 5% in 2021, on average 18.8% of the students were not white. In schools with absenteeism above 25%, on average 62.0% of the students were not white.

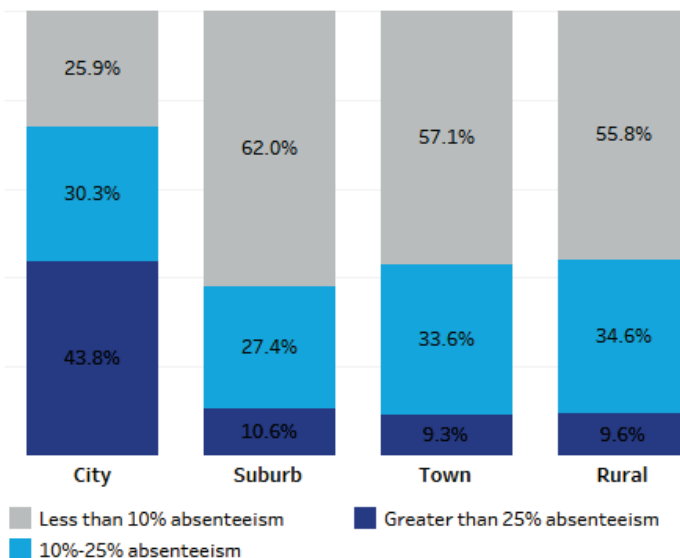
Finally, schools with larger shares of students with disabilities also tend to have higher absentee rates, although the association is less apparent due to the smaller range of disability rates across schools. In schools with absentee rates below 5% in 2021, 12.4% of the students had identified disabilities. In schools with absentee rates above 25% last year, 17.9% of students had identified disabilities. One factor to note here is that some families may have been more cautious about sending students with disabilities to school in-person because of underlying health concerns.

LOCALE ALSO MAKES A DIFFERENCE

In general, urban schools in Wisconsin have higher rates of absenteeism than those classified as suburban, town, or rural. In 2021, only a quarter (25.9%) of city schools had chronic absentee rates lower than 10%, whereas more than half of the schools in the other three locales had rates below 10% (see Figure 3).

Although urban schools experience the highest absenteeism rates by a wide margin, we have seen the 2021 increase in absenteeism was a statewide problem. That gives schools from all locales an

Figure 3: More Urban Schools Have High Absenteeism
Distribution of schools by absentee rate among students for each locale



Source: Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction

incentive to explore ways to improve student attendance.

HOW WISCONSIN COMPARES NATIONALLY

Wisconsin's increase in absenteeism appears broadly in line with trends across the country. The U.S. Department of Education has yet to publish pandemic-era data at the national level, but several sources anticipate higher levels of chronic absenteeism based on data at the state level.

A [September 2022](#) report from Attendance Works, a non-profit initiative that promotes attendance in schools, estimated that the national absentee rate for 2021 may have been as high as one in three students. Based on an analysis of state reports, the group estimates the number of chronically absent students may have doubled compared to pre-pandemic levels – from 8 million students to 16 million.

CONCLUSION

Even prior to COVID-19, chronic absenteeism was a significant problem in many schools, affecting more than 12% of public K-12 students statewide. An increase to 16% in the 2021 school year is cause for even greater concern. It's still unclear whether that increase was a one-time, pandemic-related spike. Nevertheless, Wisconsin's education leaders need to pay close attention to chronic absenteeism in the state, which negatively affects student achievement and



which we find is highest among student groups that already experience disadvantages.

New statewide data on absenteeism rates for the 2022 school year are scheduled to be released this spring and will provide new evidence on the magnitude of this challenge. If it turns out that sizable percentages of students missed higher-than-usual amounts of time in school for two successive years, then districts may need to further expand after-school tutoring and summer school as tools to make up at least some of the lost learning while also ensuring that any additional instructional time is used wisely.

In many districts, federal pandemic relief aid may still be available to fund these and other recovery efforts. However, state officials and policymakers may also see a role for statewide intervention and financial support as they initiate deliberations on the next state budget, acknowledging the serious educational setbacks created by chronic absenteeism in the wake of the pandemic and the imperative to address them before they no longer can be remedied.

