



Roll Call: Unpacking Chronic Absenteeism in Florida

Policy Brief

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Chronic absenteeism, defined as missing 10% or more of school days, has significant negative consequences on academic performance and long-term student success. In Florida, chronic absenteeism rates have surged since the COVID-19 pandemic, with notable increases from 2018 to 2023. This brief explores trends in absenteeism across the state, with a particular focus on the variation in such absenteeism and relationship between absenteeism and socioeconomic factors, such as students receiving free or reduced-price lunch (FRPL). The findings highlight the need for targeted interventions, considering school and district-specific challenges, to address the root causes of chronic absenteeism and improve student engagement and academic outcomes across Florida.

Introduction

Chronic absenteeism encompasses any missed school days, whether due to excused absences, unexcused absences, or suspensions. Chronic absenteeism is a significant and extreme form of school absenteeism, typically defined as missing 10% or more of a school year, which amounts to about 18 days or more (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012). This level of absenteeism is alarming because it is strongly linked to negative academic outcomes, including lower student achievement and graduation rates (Allensworth & Easton, 2007; Gottfried, 2014). Additionally, it correlates with long-term negative social and behavioral outcomes, such as lower educational achievement and social engagement (Gottfried, 2014). In Florida, the Department of Education (FLDOE) specifically tracks students who miss 21 or more days, as well as those absent for 10% or more of the academic year, to better address these concerning patterns of attendance and meet the requirements of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA).

In recent years, there has been a growing awareness of chronic absenteeism as a critical issue impacting student success and educational equity. Nationally, chronic absenteeism increased by almost 14% between the 2018-19 school year and 2021-22 school year and

increased even more in urban school districts such as Washington DC which saw an increase from 29% to 48% (Polikoff et al., 2023). Chronic absenteeism rates remain much higher today than they were before COVID-19.

Research indicates that chronic absenteeism disproportionately affects marginalized students, including those from low-income backgrounds and racial minority groups, exacerbating existing disparities in educational outcomes (Gee, 2018). Consequently, educators and policymakers are increasingly recognizing the need to address this issue comprehensively, moving beyond traditional approaches that often focus solely on punitive measures for students who miss school.

Federal law and initiatives, including ESSA, encourage states to adopt comprehensive strategies to reduce chronic absenteeism, with funding for programs that promote family engagement and community partnerships. For instance, some states have implemented multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) that provide targeted interventions for students facing barriers to attendance, such as mental health services and tutoring. Additionally, states like California have introduced initiatives to improve school climate and student engagement, which include mentorship programs and restorative practices, aiming to foster a supportive learning environment that addresses the underlying issues contributing to absenteeism. Despite discussions among Florida policymakers regarding the introduction of a chronic absenteeism bill during the 2024 legislative session, no such bill was ultimately passed (Dailey & News Service of Florida, 2023).

Despite the absence of recent policy changes at the state level in Florida regarding chronic absenteeism, various schools, and districts have attempted to address this issue with initiatives such as a 4-day school week, year-round school, and more punitive measures such as suspending or revoking a student's driver's license (Prieur, 2024). These different approaches underscore the recognition of chronic absenteeism as a pressing concern that can significantly impact students' academic performance and long-term success. Given Florida's high ranking in chronic absenteeism nationally (Malkus, 2024), better understanding absenteeism in the state is important and can inform targeted interventions and support systems.

The purpose of this brief is to document the prevalence and trends of chronic absenteeism in Florida, providing a comprehensive understanding of absenteeism patterns within the state. The results may inform potential interventions and support strategies for improving student attendance and educational outcomes in Florida.

Methods

The data for this analysis was obtained from the Florida Department of Education (FLDOE). The dataset covers the years 2018-2023 and includes a range of school-level and district-level indicators, including chronic absenteeism rates, graduation rates, and other key educational performance metrics. The analysis was focused on the entire state of Florida, with additional disaggregation by district and school type to explore variation across different regions and educational contexts.

The goal was to analyze trends in chronic absenteeism before and after the COVID-19 pandemic, examining how absenteeism rates evolved across different schools and districts in Florida between 2018 and 2023. Additionally, the analysis explored absenteeism trends in districts with varying levels of students receiving free or reduced-price lunch (FRPL) and different proportions of non-white students. Descriptive findings are presented graphically and in tables for easy identification of trends and variation across the years, districts, school types, and demographic compositions.

Increasing Absenteeism Across the State

The analysis of chronic absenteeism rates among students in Florida reveals an upward trend over the five academic years from 2018-2019 to 2022-2023 (see Figure 1). In the 2018-2019 school year, the chronic absenteeism rate was reported at 20.0% (meaning 20% of students across the state were absent 10% or more of the school year). The chronic absenteeism rate decreased to 16.6% in the 2019-2020 academic year; however, rose significantly in the following years. The rate increased to 25.1% in the 2020-2021 school year, coinciding with the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, which likely impacted student attendance due to health concerns and remote learning challenges. The rate continued to escalate sharply, reaching 32.3% in the 2021-2022 school year. In the most recent year analyzed, 2022-2023, the chronic absenteeism rate was 30.9%, indicating a slight decline from the previous year but still significantly higher than pre-pandemic levels.

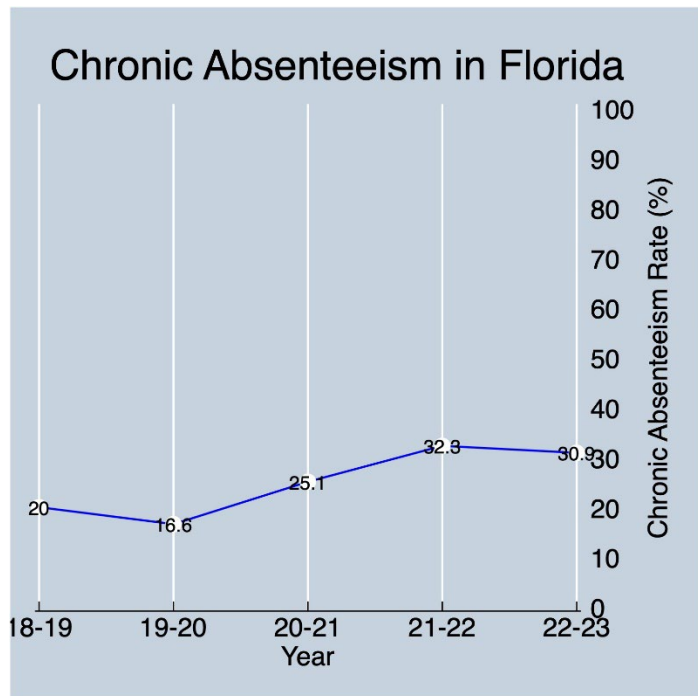


Figure 1. Variation in chronic absenteeism rates across Florida in 2018-23

Nationally, chronic absenteeism rates have shown a significant increase over recent years, rising from 15% in the 2018-2019 school year to 28% in 2021-2022 (Malkus, 2024). In the 2022-2023 school year, the first full academic year post-pandemic, this rate experienced a slight decline nationally, falling to 26%. Florida reports chronic absenteeism rates that are higher than the national average (Malkus, 2024); however, the two percentage point decrease seen in 2022-23 in Florida is a meaningful trend indicating promising changes in chronic absenteeism rates post-pandemic.

Further analysis of chronic absenteeism across districts in Florida reveals a consistent increase from the 2019-2020 to the 2021-2022 school years. However, the most recent data from the 2022-2023 academic year shows more nuanced trends, suggesting that different districts have experienced varying trends in chronic absenteeism. Specifically, while all districts experienced a rise in absenteeism during the pandemic and its immediate aftermath, the rates in 2022-2023 vary more significantly by district, potentially indicating a shift in response strategies by districts or different underlying causes of absenteeism. The nuanced trend indicates that there are bright spots within the state showing decreasing chronic absenteeism rates. However, it is too early to predict whether this promising trend will be sustained moving forward.

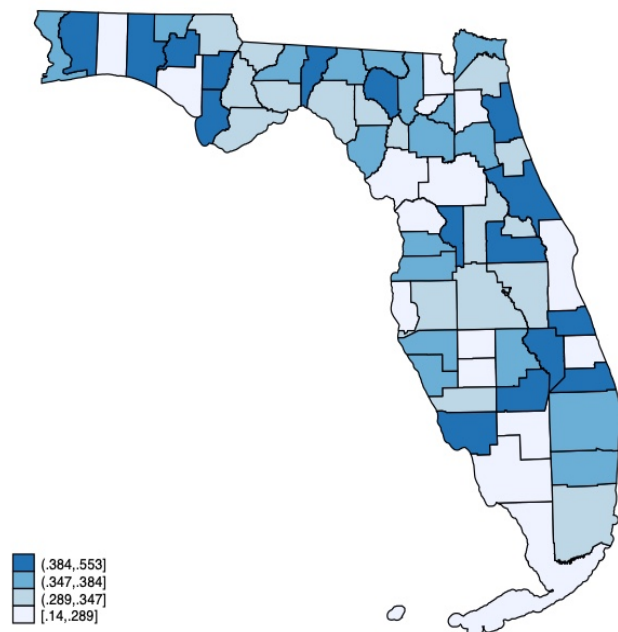
Key Findings

- Chronic absenteeism rates in Florida increased coinciding with the pandemic, rising from 16.6% in 2019-2020 to a peak of 32.3% in 2021-2022, with rates remaining significantly higher than pre-pandemic levels in 2022-2023.
- The slight decline to 30.9% in 2022-2023 suggests a promising but uncertain trend of improvement following the pandemic's impact on student attendance.
- All districts experienced rising absenteeism during the pandemic, yet some districts are showing declines in 2022-2023 — potentially reflecting a shift in response strategies by districts or different underlying causes of absenteeism to be further studied.

Wide Variation in Absenteeism Across Districts

Absenteeism rates varied significantly across the state of Florida in 2022-2023 (see Figure 2), with some areas experiencing much higher levels of chronic absenteeism than others. The lowest five districts were Sarasota (14%), St. Johns (17%), Collier (18%), Hendry (19%), and Brevard (20%). In contrast, the five highest districts were Putnam (55%), Jefferson (54%), Gadsden (49%), Franklin (48%), and Okeechobee (47%). These geographic disparities highlight that absenteeism is not uniform across the state and is influenced by factors that differ from one district to another. These differences may reflect variation in school resources, socioeconomic conditions, and local policies, all of which could contribute to the observed differences.

Chronic Absenteeism - Florida Districts in 2023



Low: <0.289, Medium: 0.289-0.347, Medium-High: 0.347-0.384, High: 0.384-0.553

Figure 2. Variation in chronic absenteeism rates across districts in Florida in 2022-23

District Urbanicity

Table 1 illustrates mean chronic absenteeism rates across different district characteristics for the years 2018-2019 to 2022-2023. In 2022-2023, rural districts exhibited the highest mean absenteeism rate at 36.49%, followed by town districts at 35.42%, urban at 31.11%, and suburban districts with the lowest rate at 29.98%. A similar pattern is observed in 2021-2022, where rural districts again had a high absenteeism rate at 37.91%, while Suburban districts maintained a relatively lower rate of 31.46%. The absenteeism rates across these categories show a general upward trend over the years, particularly in urban districts, where absenteeism increased from 16.15% in 2019-2020 to 31.11% in 2022-2023. Town districts also showed an increase, rising from 18.68% in 2019-2020 to 35.42% in 2022-2023.

Family Income

The table also presents data on students receiving free or reduced-price lunch (FRPL) across Florida school districts. Eligibility for FRPL is determined based on family income, with students qualifying if their household income meets or falls below the Income Eligibility Guidelines (Florida Department of Agriculture and Consumer Services, n.d.). The percentage of students receiving FRPL is categorized into four quartiles, with quartile one representing districts with the lowest percentage of FRPL students and quartile four representing those with the highest. On average, quartile one districts have caregivers with higher income levels, while quartile four districts have lower income levels. These quartiles are calculated based on the distribution of FRPL percentages across districts, rather than a fixed 25% split.

Table 1. Variation in chronic absenteeism rates across districts (by type) in Florida in 2018-23.

	2018-2019	2019-2020	2020-2021	2021-2022	2022-2023
Rural	26.23	19.15	38.64	37.91	36.49
Urban	17.41	16.15	22.68	29.17	31.11
Suburban	20.06	14.99	24.46	31.46	29.98
Town	26.25	18.68	32.81	38.89	35.42
FRPL quartile 1	17.58	12.04	19.28	25.37	23.62
FRPL quartile 2	20.64	17.45	26.78	34.03	33.29
FRPL quartile 3	24.27	16.14	33.66	35.84	34.21
FRPL quartile 4	28.04	23.09	39.78	42.44	41.56
% Not White quartile 1	26.05	16.55	35.73	36.60	33.68
% Not White quartile 2	20.94	15.28	27.47	32.13	32.13
% Not White quartile 3	20.30	16.57	27.87	33.02	30.38
% Not White quartile 4	23.01	20.06	28.00	35.40	35.03
Florida Overall	20.0	16.6	25.1	32.3	30.9

The socioeconomic status (SES) index in districts ranges from 0.2% to 100%, with an average of 69.8%, indicating variability in economic conditions across districts. The percentage of non-white students in districts ranges from 5.19% to 100%, with an average of 46.6%, highlighting significant demographic diversity across districts.

From 2018 to 2023, quartile four districts consistently exhibited the highest chronic absenteeism rates, while quartile one had the lowest, with quartiles two and three following this pattern in ascending order. Notably, chronic absenteeism decreased across all quartiles in 2019-20 before sharply increasing in 2020-21, likely due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Although absenteeism remained elevated through 2022-23, quartile four districts—those with the lowest income levels—reported significantly higher rates, nearly seven percentage points above other quartiles. This disparity may stem from the economic hardships exacerbated by COVID-19, which likely contributed to increased absenteeism, particularly among students facing barriers to remote learning.

This indicates that districts with higher proportions of FRPL students tend to experience higher absenteeism rates, underscoring the role of socioeconomic factors in shaping attendance patterns. These findings highlight the complexity of chronic absenteeism, emphasizing that both school characteristics and socioeconomic conditions significantly influence student attendance.

District Race

The table also presents the percentage of non-white students across Florida school districts, categorized into four quartiles. This race measure was based on a binary classification of students as either white or non-white. Quartile one represents districts with the lowest proportion of non-white students, while quartile four represents districts with the highest proportion. These quartiles are calculated based on the distribution of non-white percentages across districts, rather than a fixed 25% split.

As shown in Table 1, chronic absenteeism rates follow a consistent pattern across all four quartiles each year. There was a decline in chronic absenteeism from 2018-19 to 2019-20, followed by an increase from 2019-20 through 2021-22. In 2022-23, chronic absenteeism declined again, except for quartile two, which remained unchanged. The sharp increase in absenteeism during 2019-20 and 2020-21 is likely attributed to the COVID-19 pandemic and the transition to remote learning. As schools returned to full in-person instruction, absenteeism rates decreased but did not return to pre-pandemic levels.

Notably, quartile one and quartile four districts—those with the lowest and highest proportions of non-white students—consistently exhibit the highest chronic absenteeism rates. While quartile one districts show slightly more variation in absenteeism than others, all quartiles follow a similar trend. This suggests that the proportion of non-white students at the district level does not strongly influence chronic absenteeism rates in Florida. However, given the significant racial variation between schools within the same district, district-level measures may not accurately capture the relationship between racial composition and absenteeism. School-level analysis could provide a more accurate understanding of these dynamics.

Key Findings

- Rural districts have higher average absenteeism rates than suburban and urban.
- Districts with higher proportions of FRPL students tend to experience higher absenteeism rates, underscoring the role of socioeconomic conditions and school characteristics in shaping attendance patterns.

- Differences across districts may reflect variation in school resources, socioeconomic conditions, and local policies, all of which could contribute to the observed differences.

Absenteeism Varies Across Schools

Figure 3 illustrates the distribution of schools in one Florida district, Alachua County, based on the percentage of students absent 10% or more of the school year. The analysis reveals significant variation in chronic absenteeism rates across schools within the district, ranging from 0% to over 90%. The distribution is concentrated primarily between 10% and 50%, with the highest frequencies observed in the 20%-30% range. This indicates that most schools in the district face moderate absenteeism challenges, while fewer schools report either very low or exceptionally high rates.

The data also suggests that absenteeism rates tend to be higher in specialized schools and alternative education settings compared to traditional public schools. For example, in Alachua County, the schools in the 80-90% range are alternative schools (see Figure 3). However, it is crucial to interpret these differences cautiously, as absenteeism may hold different meanings in alternative contexts. For instance, in virtual schools, attendance could simply involve logging into a computer daily rather than physically attending a classroom, making it easier to avoid being marked as "absent." These findings highlight the wide variation across schools in chronic absenteeism.

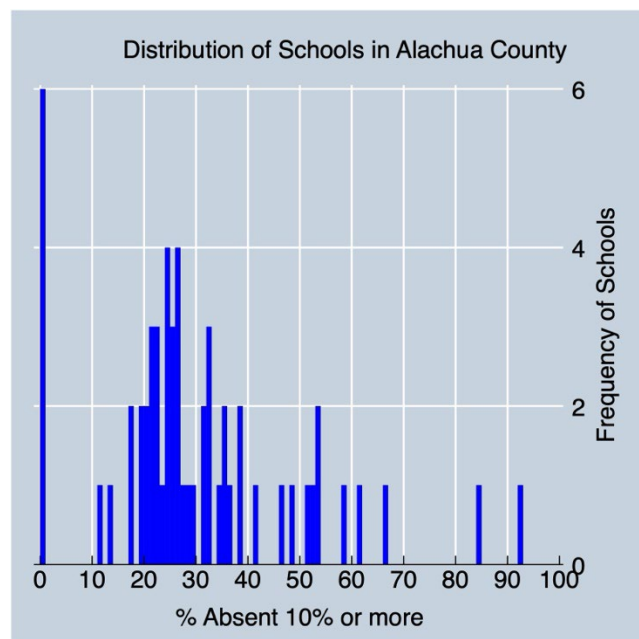


Figure 3. Variation in chronic absenteeism rates across districts in Florida in 2022-23

Key Findings

- Chronic absenteeism varies significantly across schools within district, with most schools having rates between 10% and 50%
- Most schools in the district face moderate absenteeism challenges, while fewer schools report either very low or exceptionally high rates.
- Absenteeism rates tend to be higher in specialized schools and alternative education settings compared to traditional public schools.

Implications

The findings of this analysis on chronic absenteeism in Florida have significant implications for policymakers, educators, and community stakeholders. First, the upward trend in absenteeism, particularly in the years following the COVID-19 pandemic, underscores the

need for targeted and responsive interventions. The variation in absenteeism rates across districts, especially between urban, rural, suburban, and town districts suggests that a one-size-fits-all approach may not be effective. Districts with the highest absenteeism rates, particularly rural and town districts, may require more tailored support. In contrast, urban districts, while also facing increased absenteeism, may benefit from different types of interventions.

The geographic disparities in absenteeism also highlight the role that local factors, such as socioeconomic conditions, school resources, and community support systems play in shaping student attendance. Rural and low-income areas may be more susceptible to chronic absenteeism due to factors like limited access to transportation, healthcare, or internet services. Therefore, addressing absenteeism in these areas might require a more holistic approach that goes beyond school policies to include broader social and economic support systems.

Given the nuanced nature of absenteeism, policymakers should consider a more comprehensive, holistic approach that ensures districts have the flexibility to address local challenges while maintaining equity in resources and support. Furthermore, the Florida legislature should work collaboratively with individual districts to identify and tailor interventions to their unique needs, fostering a unified yet adaptable framework for addressing chronic absenteeism. Interventions should prioritize student engagement, mental health, and community involvement.

Parents, caregivers, and communities also play a vital role in combating chronic absenteeism. In addition to supporting school-based initiatives, families should actively engage in their children's education by monitoring attendance and seeking assistance when challenges arise. Communities can further contribute by fostering a supportive environment that promotes educational engagement, providing after-school programs, mental health services, and other resources that enhance student well-being. Collaboration between schools, families, and community organizations can create a network of support that ensures students have the resources they need to succeed and remain consistently engaged in their education.

Schools, families, and community organizations can foster networks of support by using public-facing data dashboards to access information on attendance, demographics, and other local factors. Dashboards like the Safe Schools for Alex (SSFA) School Safety Dashboard, created through a collaboration with the University of Florida's Education Policy Research Center, have made such data more accessible, providing a clearer view of school safety and student well-being metrics statewide. Such data visualizations may streamline and contextualize data, offering insights on absenteeism, discipline, incidents, and more.

Finally, addressing chronic absenteeism is not solely a matter of school policies but is deeply intertwined with broader social issues, such as poverty, health disparities, and access to services. Schools and policymakers must work collaboratively with community organizations, healthcare providers, and other stakeholders to develop multifaceted strategies that address the root causes of absenteeism and promote student success.

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Appendix

Data for this analysis was drawn from the Florida Department of Education’s publicly available data.

Current Year Data: <https://www.fldoe.org/accountability/data-sys/edu-info-accountability-services/pk-12-public-school-data-pubs-reports/students.stml>

Previous Years’ Data: <https://www.fldoe.org/accountability/data-sys/edu-info-accountability-services/pk-12-public-school-data-pubs-reports/archive.stml>

FLDOE data includes measures of students who were absent 21 or more days and students absent ten percent or more of the school year. The data allows for comparisons of school and district rates and the overall state percentage. The absenteeism data includes students in public schools from PK-12th grade, including adult education students working on high school diplomas or equivalents.

The percentage of students absent 21 or more days is calculated by dividing the number of students absent 21 or more days by total enrollment. The percentage of students absent ten percent or more is calculated by dividing the number of students absent ten percent or more by the number of students enrolled ten or more days. The number of students absent ten percent or more is calculated by the annual sum of days absent divided by days enrolled. The number of students enrolled ten or more days is calculated by adding the annual sum of days present and the annual sum of days absent.

Additionally, demographic metrics were used to create comparisons among chronic absenteeism and various demographic groups, including race, socioeconomic status, and urbanicity. These variables were also pulled from the FLDOE data archives. Race is calculated by dividing the total number of students in each racial/ethnic category (Asian, American Indian or Alaska Native, Black or African American, Hispanic/Latino, Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander, White, Two or More Races) by the total number of students enrolled in each district. Socioeconomic status is calculated from the Lunch Status Report from Survey 3 in the column “Rate with Multiplier If Applicable”. This percentage is calculated by dividing the number of Free or Reduced-Price Lunch with USDA Multiplier if Applicable by the total number of students by each district. Lastly, urbanicity was identified by using the “EDGE_GEOCODE_PUBLICLEA_2223” data file from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) website. The file contains a “Locale” column that numerically identifies the urbanicity of each school district. Each number corresponds to categorical labels of City – Large (11), City – Midsize (12), City – Small (13), Suburban – Large (21), Suburban – Midsize (22), Suburban – Small (23), Town – Fringe (31), Town – Distant (32), Town – Remote (33), Rural – Fringe (41), Rural – Distant (42), and Rural – Remote (43) from the Locale Boundaries File Documentation from the NCES. All statistical comparisons, such as tables and graphs, were made using the statistical software packages of R and Stata.

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