**Fiscal Facts: Chronic Absenteeism Persists in All Corners of Wisconsin**

Despite a decline from the previous year, rates of chronic absenteeism for Wisconsin’s students in 2023 remained at historically high levels for children of every race, grade level, and socioeconomic status.

District leaders point to many causes, including lasting impacts of the pandemic, for the elevated rates of chronic absenteeism. Still, in a recent report, the Wisconsin Policy Forum found some districts have made improvements through strong communication campaigns and concerted district-wide efforts.

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

In the 2022-23 school year (referred to here as 2023), 19.5% of Wisconsin’s K-12 public school district and charter students were chronically absent. While this number represents a welcome decline from the record 22.7% of students who were chronically absent in the prior school year, it is still dramatically higher than pre-pandemic levels. Absenteeism rates remained below 13% from 2006, the first year for which we have public data, through 2020.

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

Typically, high school students have the highest levels of chronic absenteeism. This held true before, during, and after the pandemic. When it comes to the post-pandemic recovery, however, students in the youngest grade levels remained the furthest above their pre-pandemic norm.

Absenteeism in the youngest grades is particularly concerning since habits formed in the early years may carry through students’ academic careers, setting up today’s elementary school students to experience chronic absenteeism in future years at rates even higher than today’s middle and high school students. Research has tied chronic absenteeism to lower student achievement, decreased student mental health, higher dropout rates, and more challenges in adulthood.

The chronic absenteeism trend is not unique to Wisconsin. Various possible causes have been hypothesized, including worsening mental health outcomes among students. District leaders we interviewed further hypothesized other causes, such as whether families were experiencing deeper or more pervasive levels of poverty, increasing housing instability, rising costs associated with childcare, or issues with transportation.

Some possible causes seem tied to changes in the relationship between families and school since the pandemic. Before the pandemic, students with a cough or cold still might have come to school. Now, leaders say, these students are more likely to stay home. The increased prevalence of remote work may also make it easier for some parents to stay home with children. Additionally, the widespread shutdown of in-person schooling during the height of COVID-19 may have undermined the broad societal understanding that children should be in school.

While these trends are concerning, individual districts with strong recoveries – including three we talked to in Wisconsin – suggest a variety of promising approaches. Overall, these districts have adopted supportive rather than punitive measures. District leaders have seen chronically absent students return to school after they implemented a communication strategy tailored to their community’s values. Relationships have also been critical for increasing students’ connections to school. Finally, making school a place that children want to be can be a powerful antidote to absenteeism.

*This information is a service of the Wisconsin Policy Forum, the state’s leading resource for nonpartisan state and local government research and civic education. Learn more at* [*wispolicyforum.org*](https://wispolicyforum.org/research/state-tax-burden-up-but-overall-burden-still-falling/)*.*