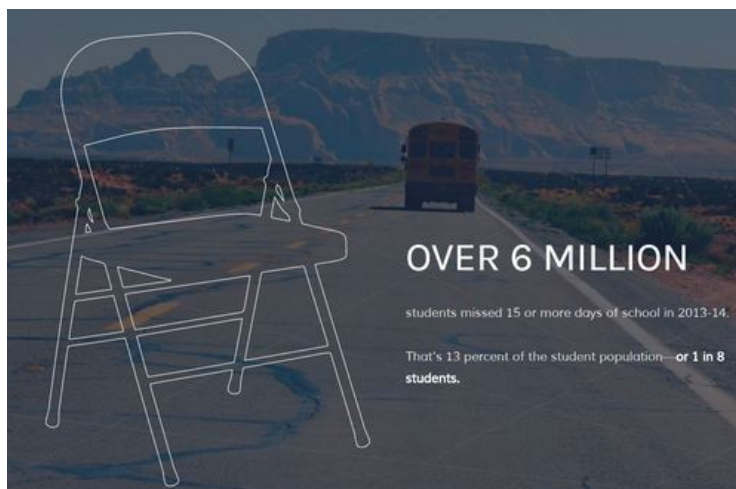


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Chronic Absenteeism: New Data Paints Clearest Picture Yet of 'Crisis,' Feds Say

By [Evie Blad](#) on June 10, 2016 6:00 AM | [2 Comments](#)



Advocates for tackling school absenteeism are lauding a new, first-of-its-kind trove of data from the U.S. Department of Education that paints the clearest picture yet of how widespread the problem of students missing school is.

To build awareness, the federal agency will announce today an [interactive website on chronic absenteeism](#) that will help break down the data in an accessible manner.

About 13 percent of all U.S. students—more than 6 million—missed at least 15 days of school in the 2013-14 school year, according to data released this week as part of the Education Department's [Civil Rights Data Collection](#). The information comes from a new question added to a biennial survey of nearly every school and district in the country that covers a variety of factors, [including discipline and access to rigorous academic courses](#).

Why is this such a big deal? Groups that seek to end chronic absenteeism have long complained that states use inconsistent measures to collect data on the issue, making it difficult to make cross-country comparisons, to gauge what's working, and how to document the problem. One issue: Some states focus on truancy, or unexcused absences, but don't do as good of a job of tracking the broader range of reasons a student may be out of the classroom.

The absences documented in the new federal data—called a "turning point in the effort to reduce and ultimately eliminate chronic absenteeism" by the Education Department—could have occurred for a variety of reasons, excused or unexcused, including truancy, suspensions, illness, or family issues. It doesn't matter why a child is out-of-school, groups like Attendance Works say; an empty desk represents [a missed opportunity to learn](#).

"Chronic absenteeism is a national problem," U.S. Secretary of Education John B. King Jr. said in a statement. "Frequent absences from school can be devastating to a child's education. Missing school leads to low academic achievement and triggers drop outs. Millions of young people are missing opportunities in postsecondary education, good careers and a chance to experience the American dream."

King will join other federal officials in presenting the new interactive website at the [Every Student, Every Day National Conference](#), which "aims to support states, local school districts, schools, and communities in their work to develop effective chronic absenteeism policy and practice; showcase how schools can address the root causes of the problem; and strengthen the collaborative capacity of multi-agency early warning systems to link students to necessary interventions, programs, and preventative services," the Education Department said.

Here are some of the most striking findings in the data.

Chronic Absenteeism Is a Pervasive Problem for Many School Districts

In nearly 500 school districts—about 3 percent of those represented by the data—at least 30 percent of students missed at least three weeks of school. Think of the implications, even for students who don't miss as many days in these schools: consistency in classroom management, group projects, student relationships.

Earlier this week, an Associated Press analysis of the data found that "of the 100 largest school districts by enrollment, the Detroit City School

District had the **highest rate of chronic absenteeism**. Nearly 58 percent of students were chronically absent in the 2013-2014 school year."

Older Students Are More Likely to Be Chronically Absent

About 19 percent of high school students missed 15 or more school days in 2013-14, compared to about 12 percent of middle school students and about 10 percent of elementary school students. That could be because high school students are more likely to be responsible for getting themselves to and from school. It also tracks with other research that shows students are **less likely to be engaged academically as they age**.

Students With Disabilities Are More Likely to Be Chronically Absent

About 17 percent of students with disabilities were chronically absent compared to 12 percent of students without disabilities. And the disparity held at every grade level—elementary, middle, and high school.

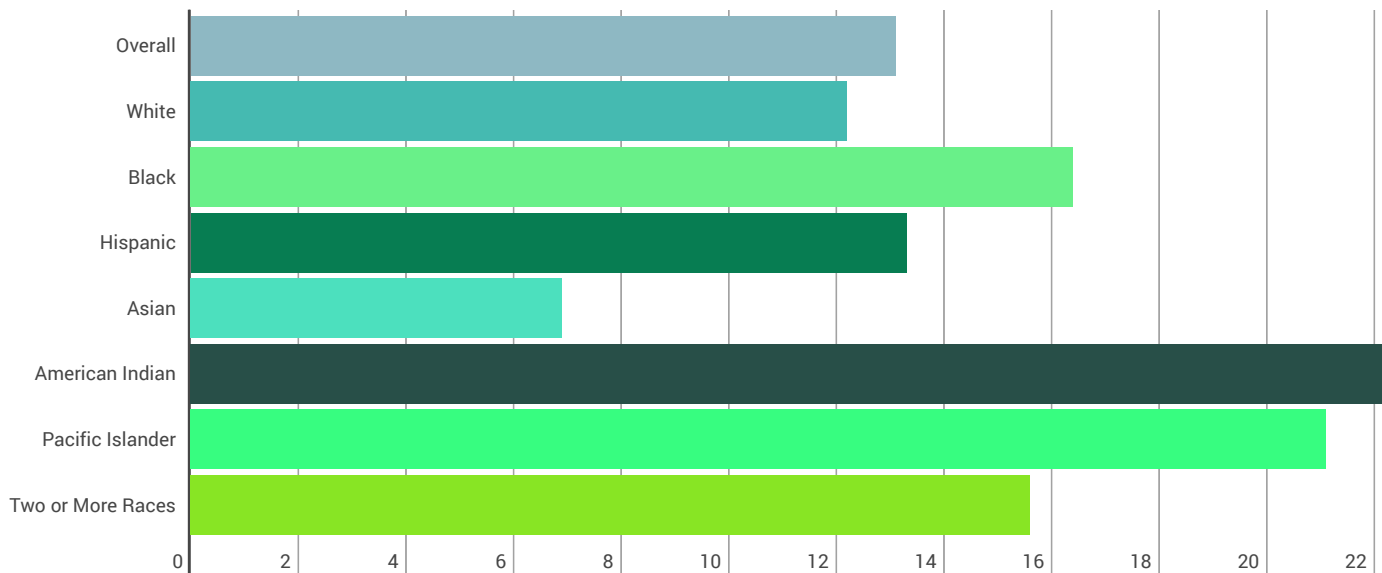
Perhaps related: Students with disabilities are also more likely to be suspended than their peers. In 2013-14, about 11 percent of K-12 students with disabilities **were suspended at least once**, compared to 5 percent of students without disabilities.

American Indian Students Have the Highest Rates of Absenteeism

While the problem of excessive school absences cuts across all racial and ethnic groups, some have higher rates than others. At the top of the list: 22 percent of American Indian students were chronically absent in 2013-14. Here's the complete breakdown:

Chronic Absenteeism

Percent of students who missed 15 or more school days in 2013-14



source: U.S. Department of Education



How Can Schools Address Absenteeism?

Some have suggested that states should consider incorporating chronic absenteeism into their school accountability plans under the **Every Student Succeeds Act**, the new federal education law. The law, which replaced No Child Left Behind, gives states authority to measure school

success using a variety of **non-academic indicators**. Some advocacy groups have argued that, because so many factors contribute to poor student attendance, it would be a good "proxy indicator" for how good of a job schools are doing in addressing things like health issues, supporting low-income students, coordinating mentorship programs, organizing community services, and communicating with families.

And, whether or not absenteeism is a factor in school accountability, child well-being groups say schools can and should tackle the issue by addressing some contributing factors.

"While today's data, the first of its kind from the U.S. Department of Education, shows that chronic absenteeism is a national crisis, we must keep in mind that chronic absence is a solvable problem," Hedy Chang, executive director of Attendance Works, said in a statement. "Our work with districts across the country shows that chronic absences can be addressed when educators and community groups join forces to educate families about the importance of avoiding unnecessary absences and helping students overcome challenges to getting to school, such as asthma, lack of dental care, unstable housing, unreliable transportation or neighborhood violence."

Further reading about school attendance and absenteeism:

- [Truancy: Balance Between Prevention, Discipline Has Long Been a Sticky Issue](#)
- [Attendance Affects Achievement: Study Provides State-by-State Look](#)
- [Raising Compulsory Attendance Age Needs Further Study, Report Says](#)
- [N.Y.C.'s Efforts to Reduce Absences Also Boosted Grades, Study Finds](#)

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