

Summary Points

- Chronic absenteeism rose statewide after Covid-19, with over 100,000 students now affected.
- All grade levels saw increases post-pandemic, especially early elementary and high school.
- Urban schools and those with 75% or more students eligible for FRL had larger post-pandemic increases and higher rates overall.
- Students eligible for FRL and special education services consistently have higher absenteeism rates than their peers.
- African American students saw the largest increase in chronic absenteeism among all demographic groups.

The Rise of Chronic Absenteeism in Arkansas: Post-Pandemic Implications for Schools and Communities

This brief examines chronic absenteeism in Arkansas K–12 public schools—defined as missing 10% of the year—before and after the pandemic. It highlights shifts over time, disparities by student and school characteristics, and offers policy recommendations, as absenteeism remains a key challenge during recovery from pandemic-related learning loss.

Introduction

Chronic absenteeism, defined as missing 10% or more of the academic year for any reason, has increased substantially since the Covid-19 pandemic in all 50 states. This increase complicates efforts to address learning loss related to the pandemic. Consistent with national trends, Arkansas's chronic absenteeism rate increased statewide. For this reason, Arkansas, along with other states, has pledged to halve chronic absenteeism rates within five years (Belsha, 2024).

This brief aims to provide more research around which students, schools, and their chronic absenteeism rates, and how these rates have changed since the pandemic.

This Brief

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Prior Research on Chronic Absenteeism

Educational Outcomes and Chronic Absenteeism

Chronic absenteeism is strongly linked to various negative educational outcomes. Students with high absenteeism face significant learning challenges, contributing to achievement gaps between regularly attending students and their peers. Research shows that chronic absenteeism lowers engagement and academic performance across all school levels (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012; Ehrlich et al., 2018).

In early elementary years, chronically absent students are less likely to achieve 3rd-grade reading proficiency benchmarks (Ehrlich et al., 2018). From middle school onward, chronic absenteeism becomes a primary indicator for high school dropout, surpassing factors such as low test scores (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2019). Furthermore, students with high absenteeism are often less socially and academically engaged and face more disciplinary issues (Gottfried, 2014).

Absenteeism tends to persist across grades, with prior chronic absenteeism being the strongest predictor of future absenteeism. Research in Chicago Public Schools found that 45% of chronically absent preschoolers were 37% more likely to remain chronically absent in kindergarten and continue to be so by 3rd grade (Ehrlich et al., 2018).

Disproportionate Impact on At-Risk Students

Chronic absenteeism disproportionately affects at-risk and minority students. Those eligible for free and reduced-price lunch, students with disabilities, and African American, Hispanic, and Native American students are particularly vulnerable to chronic absenteeism (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012; Ehrlich et al., 2018). The compounded impact of absenteeism on these groups is especially concerning, as missed instructional time prevents access to critical resources and learning opportunities (Gottfried, 2019).

High absenteeism rates can also negatively affect non-chronically absent students in classrooms where chronic absenteeism is high amongst their peers. Teachers may need to divert attention and resources to help chronically absent students catch up, which can detract from the overall quality of instruction (Gottfried, 2014). Schools with higher rates of absenteeism tend to be underperforming and are more likely to serve disadvantaged populations (Tozer & Walker, 2021).

Root Causes and Interventions

Chronic absenteeism has no single root cause. Contributing factors include health issues, transportation problems, housing instability, disciplinary actions, and feeling unsafe or unwelcome at school (Tozer & Walker, 2021). Older students, particularly, may disengage from school if they fail to see its value (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2019).

Effective interventions require schools to identify and address the underlying causes of absenteeism, which often vary by student (Eklund et al., 2022). Interventions that directly address the individual student's reasons for chronic absenteeism are essential for reducing absenteeism and improving educational outcomes for all students.

Chronic Absenteeism Post-Pandemic

Chronic absenteeism surged nationwide post-pandemic, rising 13.5 percentage points from 2017-18 to 2021-22, a 91% increase representing an additional 6.5 million students now chronically absent (Dee, 2024). This rise complicates efforts to address pandemic-related learning loss. Fourteen states, including Arkansas, pledged to halve chronic absenteeism rates within five years (Belsha, 2024).

In Arkansas, chronic absenteeism increased statewide, but understanding of which students are most affected remains limited. This study examines shifts in Arkansas's chronic absenteeism rates and explores contributing factors across student demographics, school, and district characteristics before and after Covid-19.

Study Design

This study investigates chronic absenteeism in Arkansas K–12 public schools using two primary research questions:

1. How did chronic absenteeism rates change after the Covid-19 pandemic?
2. What factors contributed to differences in attendance patterns across student demographics, schools, and districts?

Data and Methods

We use anonymized, student-level data from the Arkansas Department of Education, maintained by the Office for Education Policy (OEP). The dataset includes all K–12 public school students in Arkansas from the 2016–17 to 2022–23 school years, totaling 3,177,576 observations. We limit our sample to students with demographic and programmatic information based on school enrollment data. School characteristics, including enrollment size, school level (elementary, middle, high), and percent of FRL, were sourced from publicly available Arkansas Department of Education data. Geographic data came from the National Center for Educational Statistics.

The key outcome variable is a binary indicator for chronic absenteeism, defined as missing at least 10% of the school year.

Data and Methods Continued

To explore how absenteeism changed after Covid-19, we first use descriptive statistics averaged across three time periods:

- Pre-pandemic (2016–17 to 2018–19)
- Pandemic (2019–20 to 2020–21)
- Post-pandemic (2021–22 to 2022–23)

We focus on comparing the pre- and post-pandemic periods since attendance data collected during the pandemic was inconsistent due to virtual learning and quarantines, where students learning from home were often marked present, likely underreporting absenteeism.

Sample and Descriptive Results

Referring to Table 1, chronic absenteeism among Arkansas K–12 students rose sharply from 13.2% pre-pandemic to 21.2% post-pandemic, adding over 41,000 more chronically absent students. On average, 100,110 students statewide each year were chronically absent post-pandemic.

All groups saw increases from pre-pandemic to post-pandemic, with the largest jumps among students with additional needs. Rates for students eligible for free and reduced-price lunch rose from 16.2% to 25.2%, which represents 75,602 students eligible for FRL who are chronically absent. Special education students saw an increase from 17.9% to 26.5%, which represents 17,576 students with special education services who are chronically absent. African American students had the highest post-pandemic rate at 28.3%, followed by Hispanic students at 21.6%, nearly doubling from 11.3%. White students' rates increased to 18.8%. Female students saw a slightly higher increase than males (21.6% vs. 20.9%). These trends highlight deepening disparities and underscore the need for targeted support to reduce absenteeism.

More information about our sample and overall descriptive statistical change in chronic absenteeism can be found in our [full report](#).

Table 1:

Sample and Overall Chronically Absent Percentages for Arkansas K-12 Public School Students

	Sample Size			Percent Chronically Absent		
	Pre-Pandemic	Pandemic	Post-Pandemic	Pre-Pandemic	Pandemic	Post-Pandemic
Full Sample	444,619	450,310	471,558	13.2	10.9	21.2
Female	216,201	219,378	229,618	13.2	10.8	21.6
Male	228,418	230,933	241,940	13.1	11.0	20.9
White	274,448	271,777	279,147	12.6	9.3	18.8
African American	87,122	87,318	89,431	16.3	15.7	28.3
Hispanic	58,112	61,816	67,302	11.3	10.8	21.6
Two or More Races	11,309	14,713	19,274	15.1	13.6	24.5
Other Race	10,825	12,052	13,547	9.3	8.4	17.5
FRL Eligible	275,362	285,296	300,009	16.2	13.3	25.2
Special Education	54,739	60,163	66,326	17.9	14.3	26.5

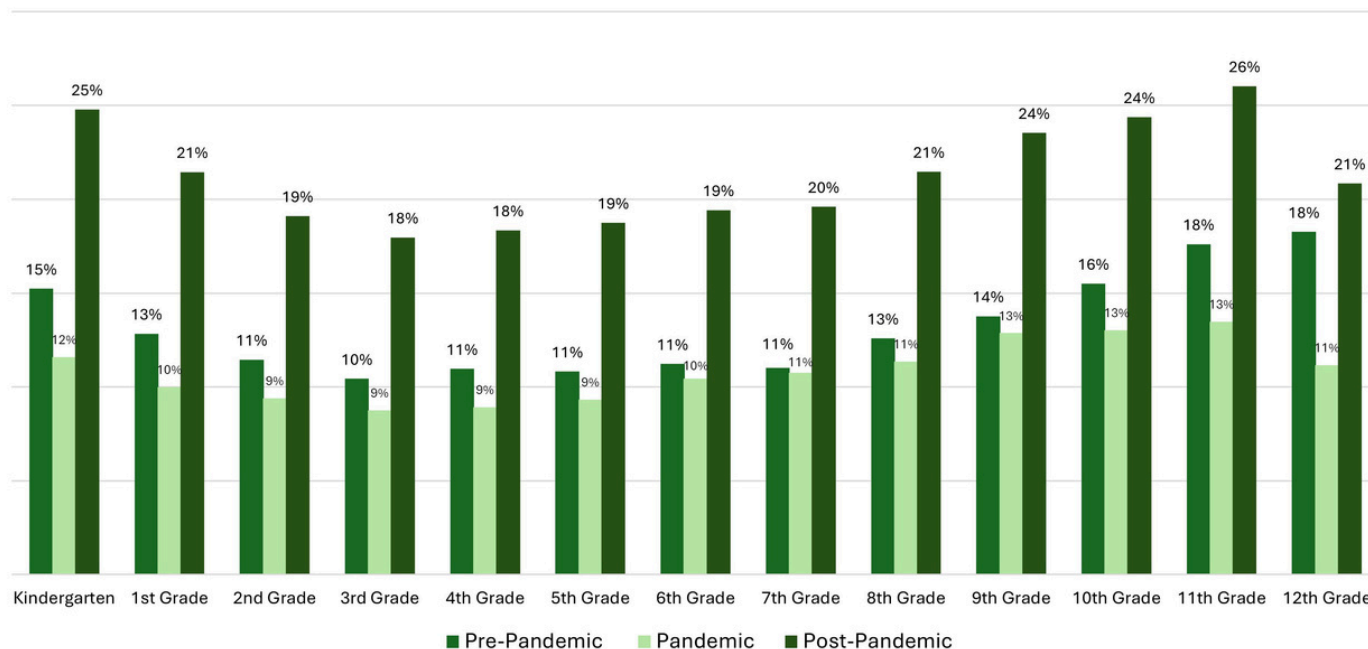
Note: Values represent the average annual rate from 2017-2019 (Pre-pandemic), 2020-2021 (Pandemic) and 2022-2023 (Post-Pandemic)

Grade Level Breakdown

Figure 1 illustrates the average percentage of chronically absent Arkansas K-12 students by grade across pre-pandemic, pandemic, and post-pandemic periods. Chronic absenteeism increased in all grades, post-pandemic, with the highest rates in early elementary and high school. This distribution, with the highest chronic absenteeism in early elementary and high school, is consistent with national trends.

Figure 1:

Arkansas K-12 Public School Students: Percent Chronically Absent by Grade Level and Time Period



School Free and Reduced-Price Lunch Rate

Table 2 shows each Arkansas public school's percentage of students eligible for free and reduced-price lunch (FRL) and their chronic absenteeism rates across pre-pandemic, pandemic, and post-pandemic periods. Schools are divided into quartiles based on annual FRL rates, which can change yearly.

Table 2:

School FRL Eligibility Rates and Percent of Chronically Absent Students by Time Period

	Sample Size			Percent Chronically Absent		
	Pre-Pandemic	Pandemic	Post-Pandemic	Pre-Pandemic	Pandemic	Post-Pandemic
Full Sample	444,619	450,310	471,558	13.2	10.8	21.2
Below 25%	17,956	22,984	25,704	8.1	7.0	13.2
25 to 50%	117,069	113,290	134,382	11.8	9.3	18.1
50 - 75%	201,780	199,694	200,954	13.3	10.6	21.1
75% - 100%	107,814	114,343	110,518	15.3	13.7	27.0

Note: Values represent the average annual rate from 2017-2019 (Pre-pandemic), 2020-2021 (Pandemic) and 2022-2023 (Post-Pandemic)

Chronic absenteeism consistently increases as the percentage of FRL-eligible students rises across all time periods. However, these discrepancies are more pronounced in the post-pandemic time period. Post-pandemic rates were highest in schools with 75-100% FRL eligibility, jumping from 15.3% pre-pandemic to 27.0% post-pandemic—an increase of 11.7 percentage points or 76.9%. Overall, chronic absenteeism rose across all schools, with the highest rates found in schools serving a large percentage of economically disadvantaged students.

Geographical Density Breakdown

Table 3:
Geographical Density Information of Schools and Chronically Absent Student Percentages

	Sample Size			Percent Chronically Absent		
	Pre-Pandemic	Pandemic	Post-Pandemic	Pre-Pandemic	Pandemic	Post-Pandemic
Full Sample	444,619	447,498	471,558	13.2	10.8	21.2
Rural	156,548	159,208	168,175	12.2	9.5	18.5
Town and Suburb	163,216	158,165	163,831	13.6	10.2	20.9
City	124,855	130,126	139,552	13.7	13.4	24.8

Note: Values represent the average annual rate from 2017-2019 (Pre-pandemic), 2020-2021 (Pandemic), and 2022-2023 (Post-Pandemic)

In Table 3, schools are categorized by geographical density: rural, city, and a combined group of towns and suburbs. Towns and suburbs are grouped due to similarities and smaller sample sizes. Table 3 shows average student population by pandemic time frame, revealing an increase from pre- to post-pandemic across all categories except towns and suburbs, where growth stagnated. Table 3 also provides chronic absenteeism rates by density. Before the pandemic, absenteeism was relatively stable across density, ranging from 12.2% to 13.7%. Post-pandemic, chronic absenteeism rose sharply and became more varied. City schools had the highest rate at 24.8%, followed by towns and suburbs at 20.9%, and rural schools at 18.5%. Despite rural areas having the lowest post-pandemic rate, it still marked a notable rise from pre-pandemic levels.

School Districts and Percentage of Chronically Absent Students

Figure 2:
Arkansas School District Map with Percentages of Chronically Absent Students by Time Period

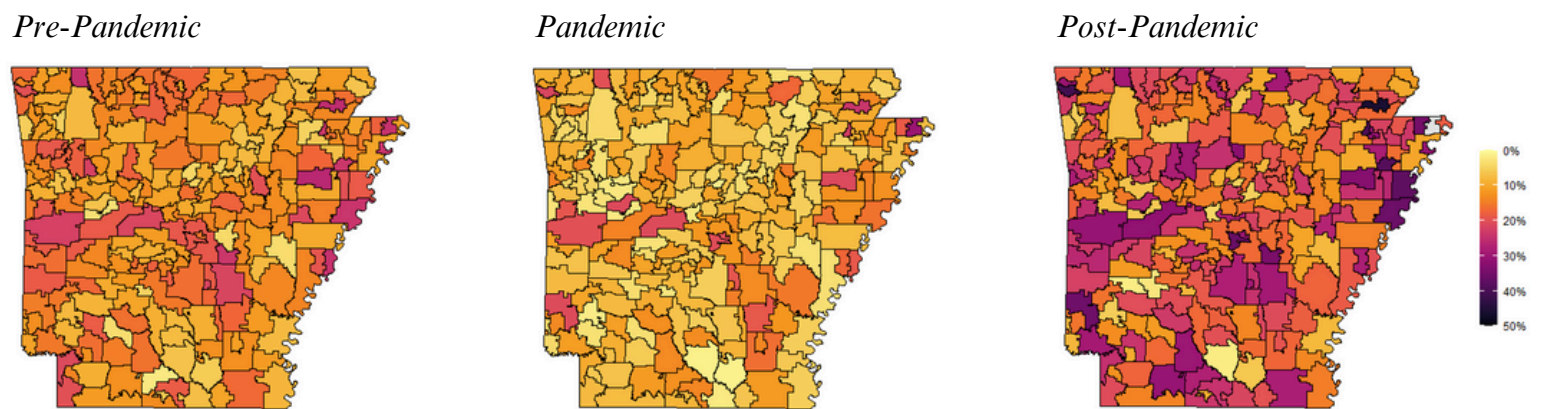


Figure 2 displays Arkansas public school districts with color-coded shading to represent the average percentage of students chronically absent across pre-pandemic, pandemic, and post-pandemic periods. The map shows a widespread increase in chronic absenteeism statewide, with most districts experiencing higher rates post-pandemic. However, some districts maintained lower absenteeism rates despite being surrounded by high-rate areas, suggesting that targeted efforts can successfully address chronic absenteeism. The variation in rates across neighboring districts highlights that while the problem is widespread, it is not insurmountable. Effective strategies at the local level can mitigate chronic absenteeism, even during a period marked by systemic challenges and increased absenteeism overall.

Regression Results

To examine what factors influenced absenteeism, we combine descriptive statistics with an ordinary least squares (OLS) regression model including district fixed effects. This approach controls for district characteristics while identifying patterns linked to student and school traits.

Student Characteristics

Figure 3:
Arkansas K-12 Public School Students: Chronic Absenteeism Regression with District Fixed Effects, 2017-2023

Our model includes school-level controls—such as school FRL percentage, enrollment size, school level, and geographic setting—and student-level controls like race/ethnicity, FRL eligibility, and special education status. Time-period indicators are also included to capture the pandemic's impact. This analysis helps isolate key drivers of chronic absenteeism and reveals disparities across student groups and school contexts, offering guidance for targeted interventions in Arkansas.

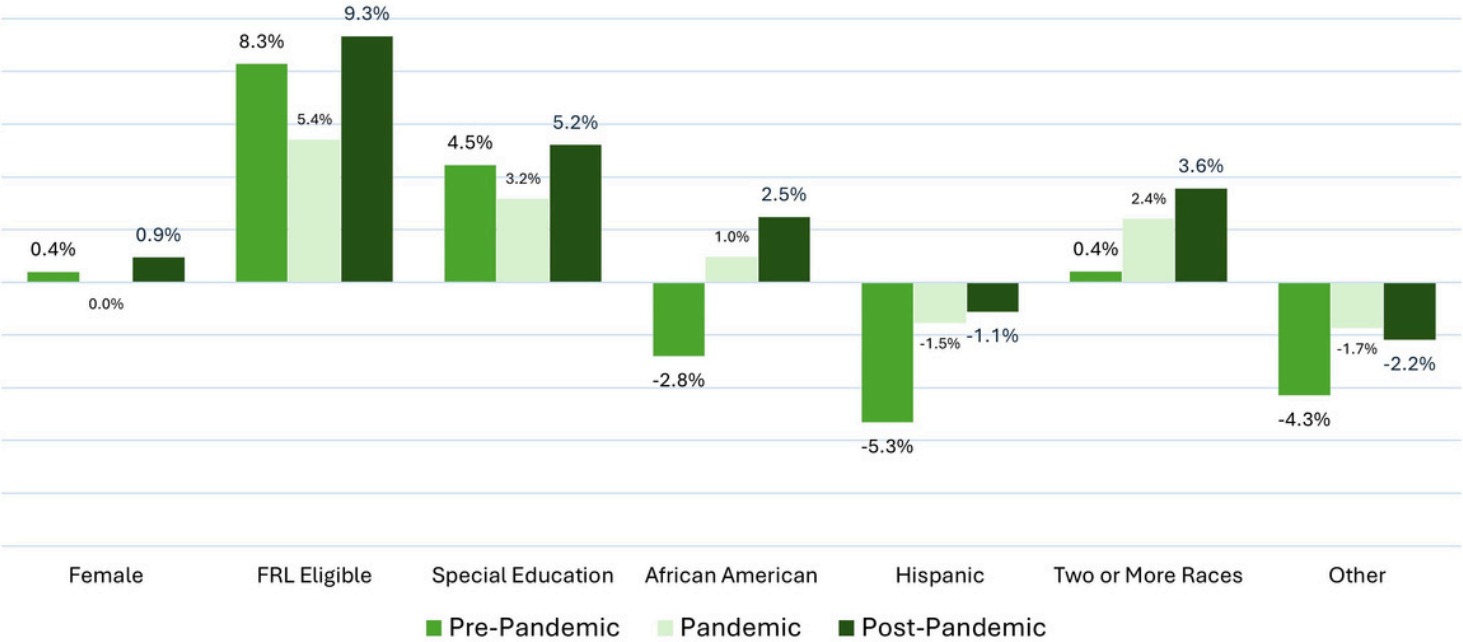


Figure 3 shows our multi-variable regression results related to student characteristics and their likelihood to be chronically absent. Nearly all results are statistically significant at the 99% confidence interval, due to our large sample size. Please refer to the [full report](#) for more details on the regression model. While the coefficients comparing chronic absenteeism likelihood across student and school characteristics are informative, they are not causal.

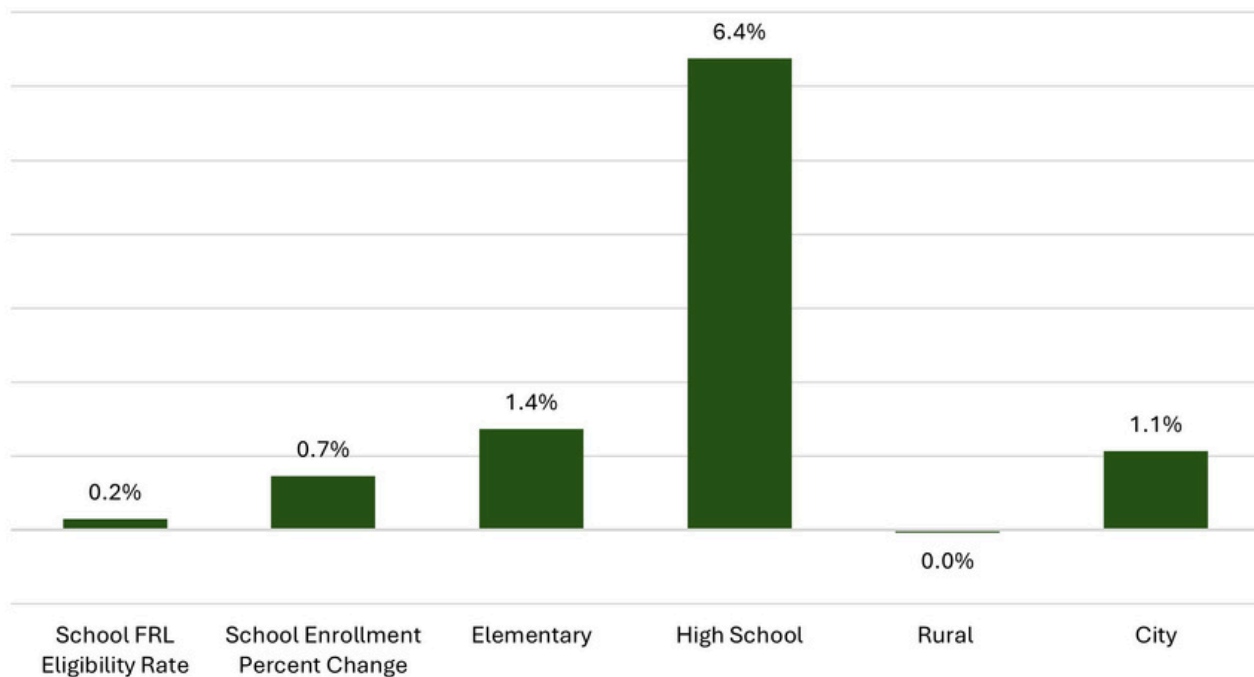
Controlling for other variables, students were 5.1 percentage points more likely to be chronically absent post-pandemic compared to pre-pandemic. Free and reduced-price lunch eligibility increased a student’s likelihood of chronic absenteeism from 8.3 percentage points pre-pandemic to 9.3 percentage points post-pandemic. Special education students experienced a similar rise, from 4.5 to 5.2 percentage points. Disparities amongst different student demographics also emerged. African American students, previously -2.8 percentage points, indicating they were less likely to be chronically absent than White students, became 2.5 percentage points more likely post-pandemic. Hispanic students' likelihood of chronic absenteeism rose from -5.3 to -1.1 percentage points compared to White peers. Students identifying as two or more races saw an increase from 0.4 to 3.6 percentage points, while those of another race rose from -4.3 to -2.2 percentage points. Female students’ likelihood of chronic absenteeism compared to male students increased from 0.4 to 0.9 percentage points post-pandemic.

These likelihoods are generalized and do not signify that all students with these demographics will be chronically absent. Instead, these disparities should highlight that different students and districts may have different needs when addressing attendance and engagement in school. Overall, results indicate substantial increases in chronic absenteeism across various student groups following the pandemic.

Regression Results Continued: School Characteristics

Figure 4:

Arkansas K-12 Public Schools: Chronic Absenteeism Regression with District Fixed Effects, 2017-2023



Our school characteristic results from our regression model can be found in Figure 4. Similar to student demographics, our regression highlights disparities in chronic absenteeism rates related to school characteristics.

Students are 0.2 percentage points more likely to be chronically absent for every percentage point increase in a school's free or reduced-price lunch rate and 0.7 percentage points for every percentage point increase in enrollment. Elementary school students are 1.4 percentage points more likely to be chronically absent compared to middle school students. Students in high schools have an even higher likelihood of being chronically absent, at 6.4 percentage points, compared to middle school students. Students who attend schools in urban areas are 1.1 percentage points more likely to be chronically absent than those in schools located in towns and suburbs, while students in rural-area schools showed no significant difference.

Conclusions

This study examines chronic absenteeism trends in Arkansas K-12 public schools, highlighting differences across districts, schools, and student groups. Findings confirm a significant rise in absenteeism post-Covid-19, affecting all grade levels. Chronic absenteeism grew disproportionately in schools with certain characteristics, especially those in urban areas and with 75% or more of students eligible for free and reduced-price lunch. High-needs and minority students experienced the sharpest increases, with the highest absenteeism rates among FRL students, special education students, and African American students.

These outcomes are generalized and do not signify that all students and schools with these characteristics will struggle with chronic absenteeism. Instead, these disparities highlight that different students and districts may have different needs when addressing attendance and engagement in school. These insights underscore the need for targeted interventions to address chronic absenteeism's disproportionate impact on vulnerable student populations.

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Policy Recommendations

Addressing chronic absenteeism is critical as educators tackle post-pandemic learning loss nationwide. Without consistent student attendance, no learning loss intervention can be successful. Therefore, we advocate for integrating chronic absenteeism reduction into broader Covid-19 post-pandemic education policies.

Chronic absenteeism has no singular cause; rather, multiple factors often contribute to a student's irregular attendance. Our regression model excludes barriers such as housing, transportation instability, illness, and school engagement, because this data is not available. This lack of information will limit the effectiveness of interventions.

To address this gap, we have developed a student survey to assess school engagement and attendance barriers. A valid, reliable survey will provide insights into the root causes of chronic absenteeism, allowing for targeted interventions. Please [contact us](#) if you would like to partner with us to survey students about the root causes of chronic absenteeism.

Chronic absenteeism has become a widespread issue both nationally and in Arkansas since the pandemic. High-need schools and student populations are especially affected. Communities and school districts should review their attendance and chronic absenteeism data to assess how rates have shifted since the pandemic. Districts are encouraged to evaluate current attendance policies and determine whether adjustments or new interventions are necessary to address emerging attendance challenges. We also recommend that policymakers collaborate with school districts and leaders to better understand the root causes and develop targeted interventions as part of a broader post-pandemic education strategy.

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