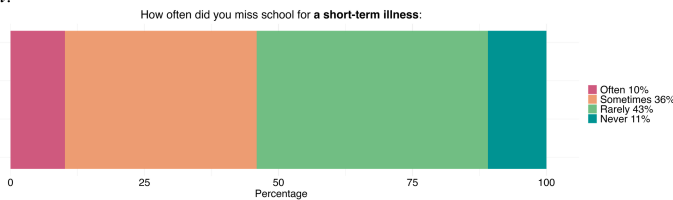
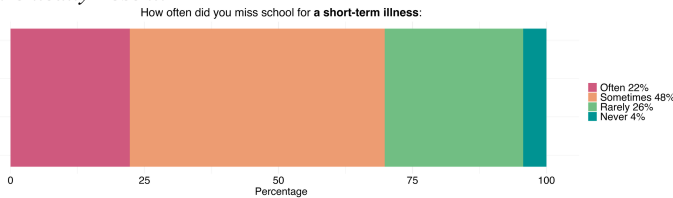


Short-term Illness

All:

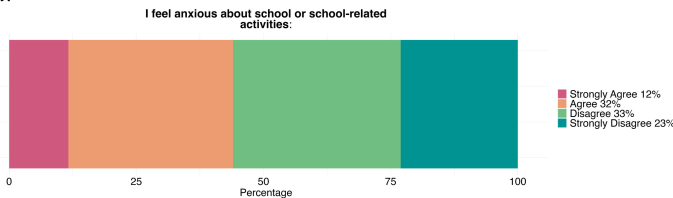


Chronically Absent:

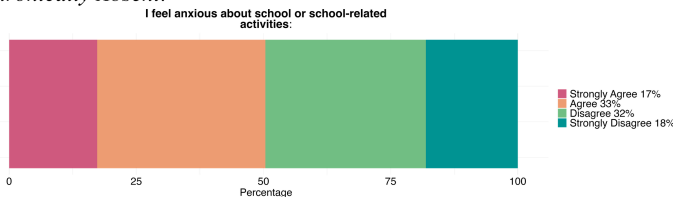


Anxiety About School

All:

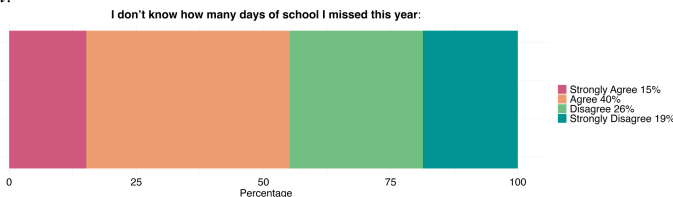


Chronically Absent:

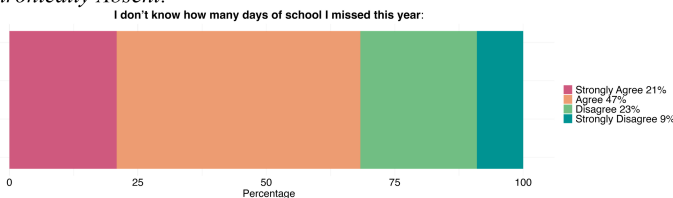


Lost Track of Absences

All:



Chronically Absent:



Executive Summary

This report shares the results of the Office for Education Policy's Student Engagement and Absenteeism Root Causes Survey for the 2025-26 school year. This survey is designed to be administered to students in 7th through 12th grade to better understand why they are absent from school. In 2025-26, 2,621 students completed the survey.

Key Findings:

- Short-term illness was a common cause of absences in both the full student sample and among students who are chronically absent. Among the whole student population, 46% of students responded that they miss school due to a short-term illness "often," or "sometimes," this rate rose to 70% among students who are chronically absent.
- When asked about anxiety related to school, 44% of all students and 50% of students who are chronically absent responded "strongly agree" or "agree" to the statement, "I feel anxious about school or school-related activities."
- Students indicated that they were unsure how many days they were absent each year with 55% of the full student sample and 68% of chronically absent students responding "strongly agree" or "agree" with the statement "I don't know how many days of school I missed this year."

Introduction

Chronic absenteeism rates both in Arkansas and nationally remain high since the Covid-19 pandemic (Malkus, 2025; Shaw & McKenzie, 2025). Defined as being absent for at least 10% of the school year for any reason, chronic absenteeism is associated with lower academic achievement, lower emotional well-being, and a decreased likelihood to graduate from high school (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2019; Gottfried, 2014). Student who are chronically absent tend to maintain higher absenteeism rates year after year, and students who qualify for extra supports such as special education and free and reduced-price lunch, a proxy for low socio-economic status, tend to have higher rates of chronic absenteeism (Ehrlich et al., 2018; Eklund et al., 2022).

There are many reasons a student may be absent from school. For most students, there is no single explanation; rather, multiple factors contribute to higher absenteeism rates (Chang et al., 2019; “Identify the Root Causes of Absence,” 2025). Student absenteeism may be due to illness, insufficient transportation, or work outside of school. Anxiety, aversions, or a lack of interest in school may also impact a student’s attendance rate. Students may also be unaware that they are absent too often. Before educators and schools can intervene to reduce high rates of absenteeism, they need to better understand the root causes of student absences.

In 2024, Arkansas joined 16 other states in AttendanceWork’s challenge to decrease chronic absenteeism rates statewide by 50% in five years (Belsha, 2024). To assist schools in addressing chronic absenteeism, we have developed the Student Engagement and Absenteeism Root Causes Survey. This survey, appropriate for students in 7th grade and higher, aims to better understand why students are absent from school as well as their perceptions of their school and their own attendance.

This report highlights key findings from over 2,000 students who took the survey in 2025-26. We also match student survey responses to the corresponding student’s attendance rates from the 2024-25 school year. We can then compare survey responses between chronically absent students and the overall student population.

Key findings include students identifying short-term illness, mental health, and outside responsibilities as barriers to school attendance. Students were also unsure of their attendance rate for the year. When asked about engagement factors in schools, students felt supported by their teachers but reported some struggles with schoolwork and a lack of electives or extracurriculars that interested them.

Analysis and Methods

Survey Design

Our survey was designed to address the four root-cause categories of chronic absenteeism outlined by *Attendance Works*: barriers, aversions, disengagement, and misconceptions (“Identify the Root Causes of Absence,” 2025). These categories can be fluid, and oftentimes, there is no single root cause of a student’s high absence rate, but organizing the survey into these categories can help make sense of student responses and further inform intervention design. This report will outline key findings in each category, and results for all survey questions can be found in the report appendix starting on page 21.

Analysis & Sample

This report highlights key findings for the statewide sample of students who took the survey during the 2025-26 school year.

Information on our sample is available in *Table 1*, along with a comparison to the corresponding statewide demographic information. Overall, 2,621 students across eleven districts took the survey. We matched student survey responses with their demographic information and absenteeism rates from the 2024-25 school year. This is deidentified administrative data collected from the Arkansas Department of Education and maintained by the Office for Education Policy (OEP). We were able to match 2,273 student survey responses to administrative records, which constitutes our sample. Of the students who took the survey and whose demographic and attendance information we could match, 399 were identified as chronically absent. Our survey is aimed at students in grades 7 through 12, and our sample is limited to those grade levels.

One limitation of our report is the somewhat lower response rate among students identified as chronically absent compared with the overall state percentage. Within our sample, 17.6% of students were identified as chronically absent, whereas the overall state chronically absent rate is 22.9% in the 2024-25 school year. This variance could be due to the sample of districts that administered the survey or students with higher absenteeism rates being absent during the survey administration. Our sample is overall representative of the overall Arkansas public K -12 student population in regards to gender

and race, although there is a slight underrepresentation of students who receive special education services and students eligible for free and reduced price lunch.

We will continue to update this report in future years and as more schools administer the survey. Please consider partnering with us this year and obtaining parental consent to administer the survey this year.

Table 1 – Survey Response Sample Information

	Survey Response Sample			State Characteristics		
	Survey Responses (n)	Chronically Absent (n)	% Chronically Absent	Grades 7 - 12	Chronically Absent (n)	% Chronically Absent
<i>Student Demographics</i>						
Female	1,114	220	19.7%	129,052	29,814	23.1%
White	1,471	250	17.0%	152,404	31,115	20.4%
Black	361	71	19.7%	50,000	13,686	27.4%
Hispanic	257	50	19.5%	41,773	10,019	24.0%
Other	52	6	11.5%	9,461	1,835	19.4%
Two or More Races	132	22	16.7%	11,217	3,049	27.2%
<i>Student Characteristics</i>						
Free and Reduced Lunch	1,297	266	20.5%	163,196	42,777	26.2%
Special Education	206	43	20.9%	33,913	9,116	26.9%
English Learner	80	12	15.0%	20,741	5,898	28.4%
Homeless	61	11	18.0%	8,726	3,057	35.0%
<i>Grade Level</i>						
7	564	116	20.6%	37,164	7,634	20.5%
8	633	101	16.0%	37,350	8,409	22.5%
9	160	27	16.9%	39,962	9,432	23.6%
10	640	116	18.1%	39,779	9,944	25.0%
11	136	17	12.5%	38,549	10,012	26.0%
12	140	22	15.7%	35,606	6,959	19.5%
Total	2,273	399	17.6%	228,410	52,390	22.9%

Results

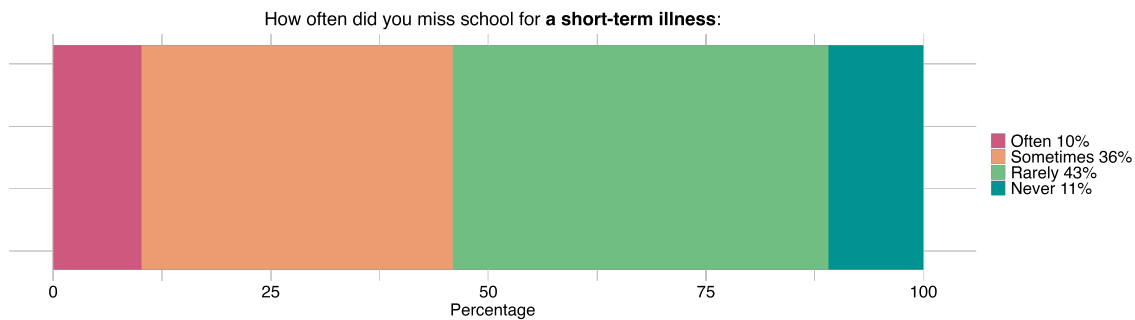
Barriers

The barriers category of questions highlights external factors that hinder a student's regular attendance at school. These outside influences can be tangible things, including transportation, or not having proper school supplies or food. It can also include intangible influences like illness, both short-term and long-term, work or family responsibilities, or mental health-related issues. Based on student responses, short-term illness, mental health issues, and work responsibilities outside of school are the most common barriers to regular attendance.

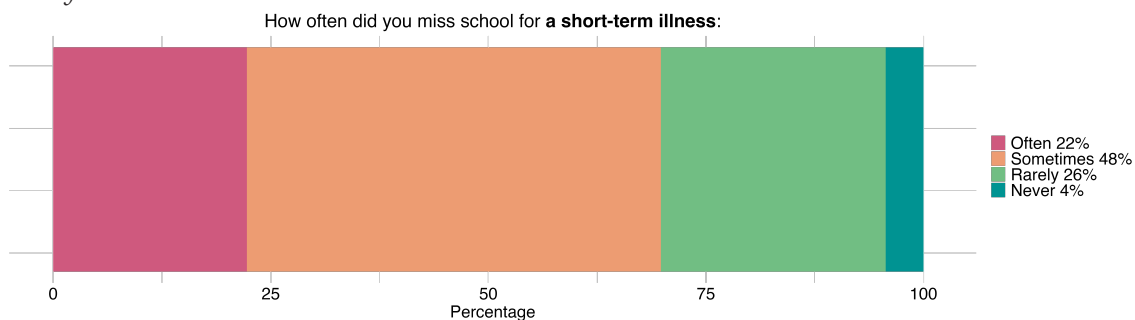
Key Findings

Short-term illness Short-term illness is a commonly cited reason for missing school among all students and occurs at higher rates among chronically absent students. The whole student population responded "often" and "sometimes" at 46%. Among students who were chronically absent, 70% chose the responses "often" or "sometimes."

All:



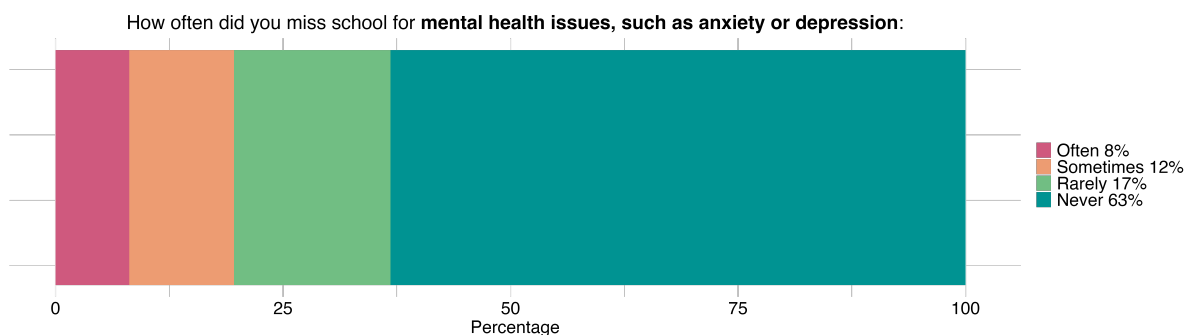
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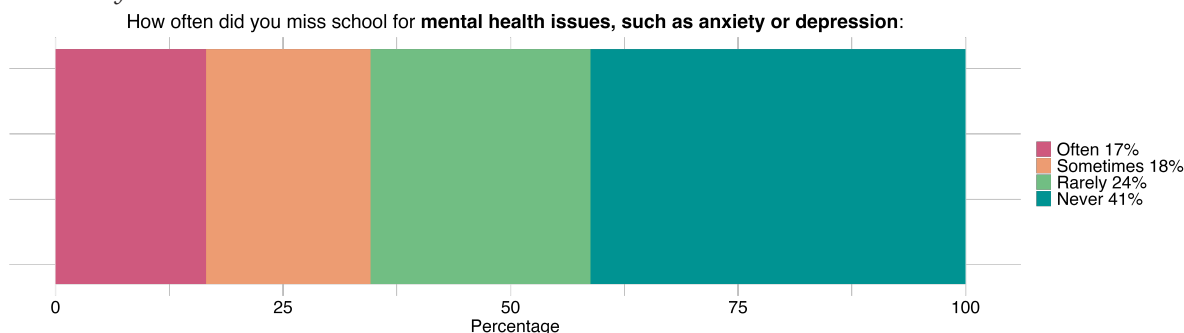
Mental health issues, such as anxiety or depression

Students also reported that mental health issues, such as anxiety or depression, were reasons they missed school. Within the whole student sample, 20% chose “often” or “sometimes” when asked, “how often did you miss school for mental health issues, such as anxiety or depression.” These rates increased among students who are chronically absent, with 35% who chose “often” or “sometimes.” Note: It is important to note that student responses may not represent a diagnosed mental health condition.

All:



Chronically Absent:



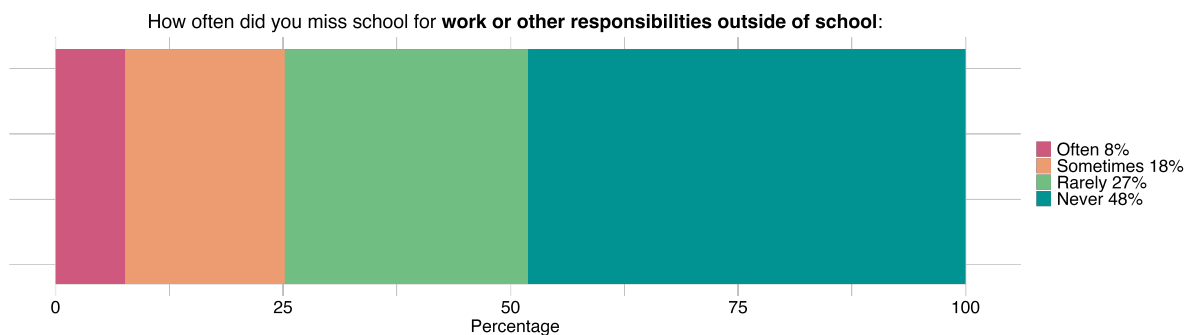
Work or other responsibilities outside of school

Students indicated that work or other responsibilities outside of school also affected their attendance. For the overall student sample, 26% responded that work or other responsibilities impacted their school attendance “often” or “sometimes.” Students who are chronically absent had more pronounced rates, with 31% who chose the “often” or “sometimes” response.

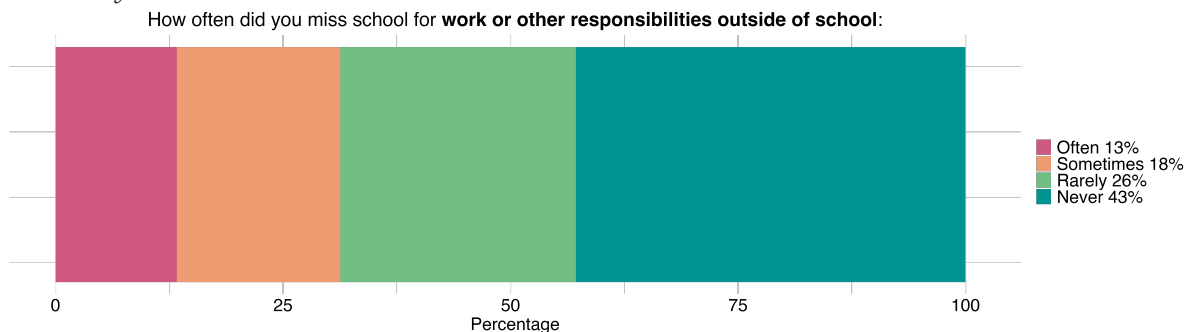
These response rates are also slightly higher among students in 9th through 12th grade. For the overall students in these upper grades, 28% responded “often,” or “sometimes,” and those chronically absent in upper grades responded “often” or “sometimes” at 38%. This amounts to nearly 40% of

chronically absent high school students citing work and other outside-of-school responsibilities as reasons they miss school.

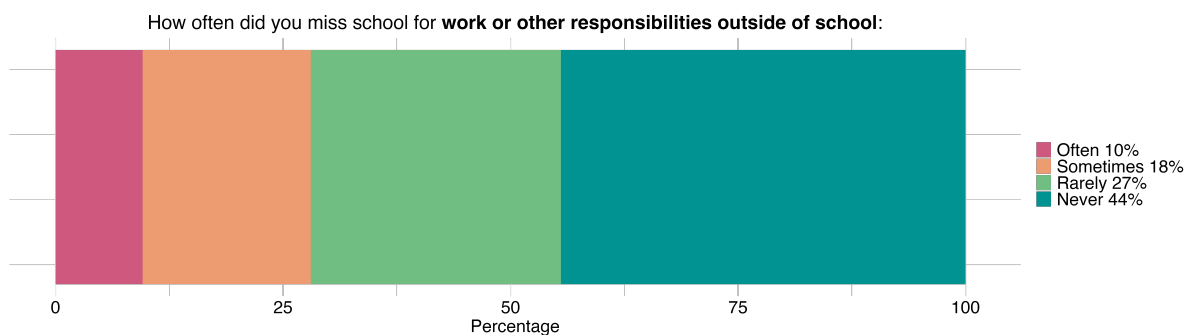
All:



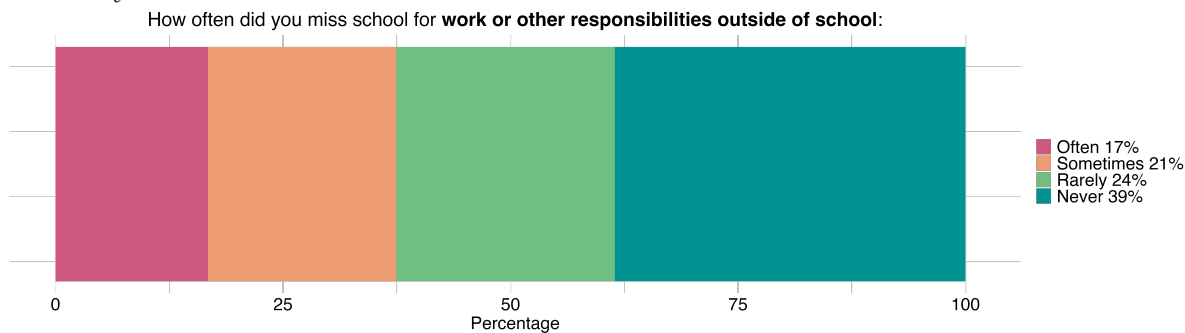
Chronically Absent:



All: Grades 9 - 12



Chronically Absent: Grades 9 - 12



Aversions

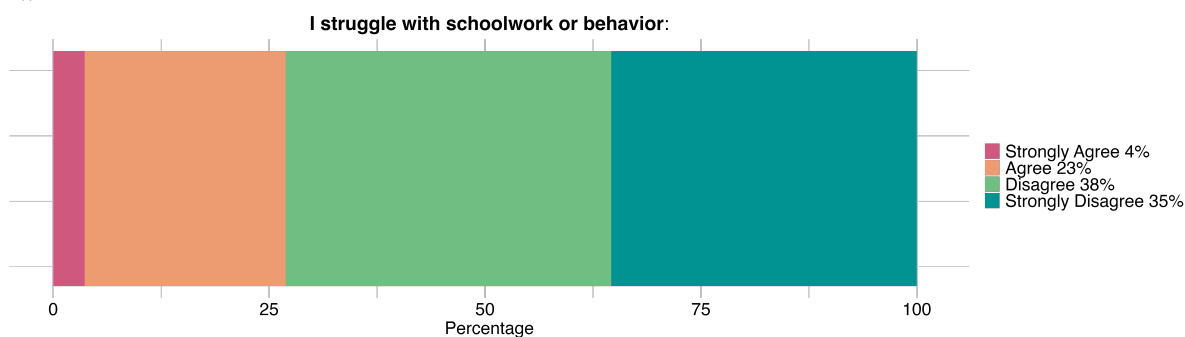
The aversion category includes questions about a student's relationship to school and the general school environment. There are questions about how a student generally feels about attending school and whether obstacles like safety concerns, anxiety, or learning disabilities affect a student's interactions with their school.

Key Findings

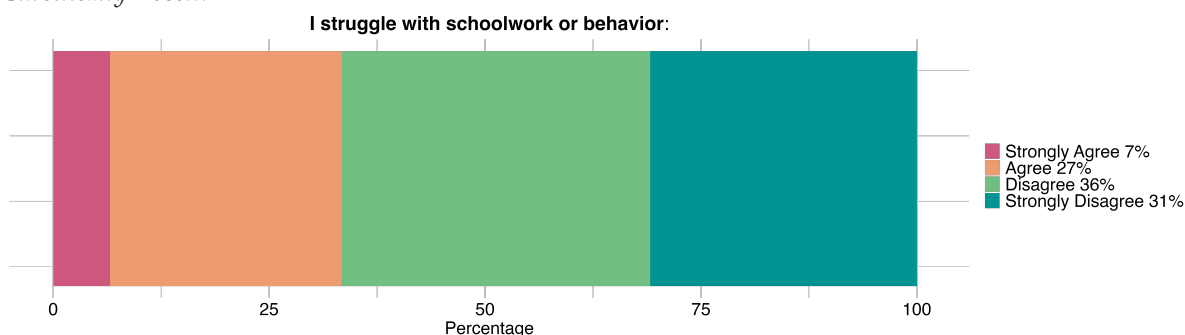
"I struggle with schoolwork or behavior."

Of the whole student sample, 27% strongly agreed or agreed that they struggled with their schoolwork or behavior. Those students who are chronically absent had more pronounced responses, with 34% who strongly agreed or agreed.

All:



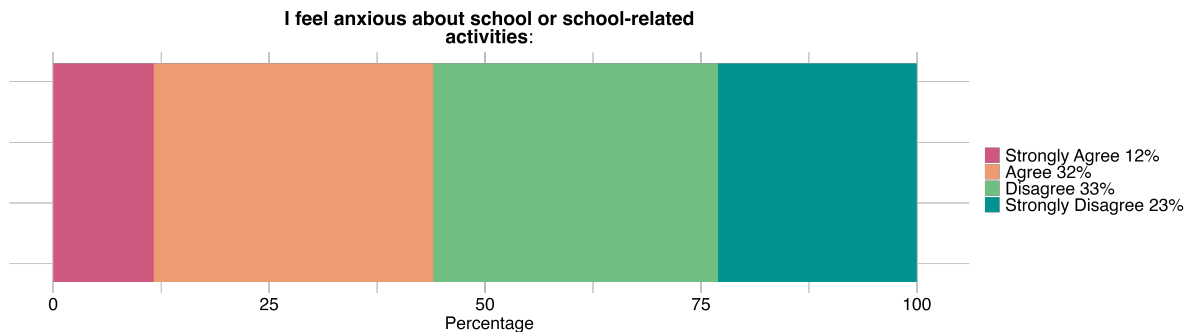
Chronically Absent:



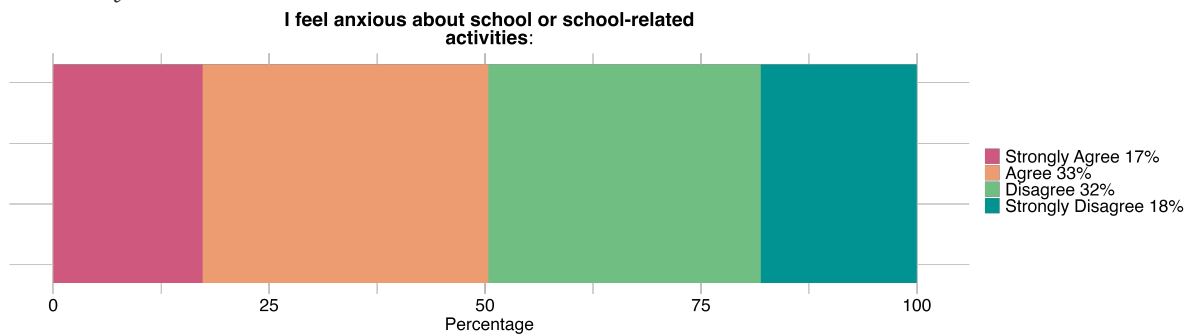
“I feel anxious about school or school-related activities.”

When asked about anxiousness related to school or school-related activities, 44% of the whole student sample strongly agreed or agreed with the statement “I feel anxious about school or school-related activities.” These rates were higher among chronically absent students, with 50% who indicated “strongly agree” or “agree.”

All:



Chronically Absent:



Disengagement

The disengagement category asks questions about how a student interacts within a school. The survey asks about a student's interactions with people, academic learning, and electives and extracurricular activities. These results provide insights regarding how students feel engaged in their school experience, and a breakdown of the strengths and areas for improvement within a school's culture.

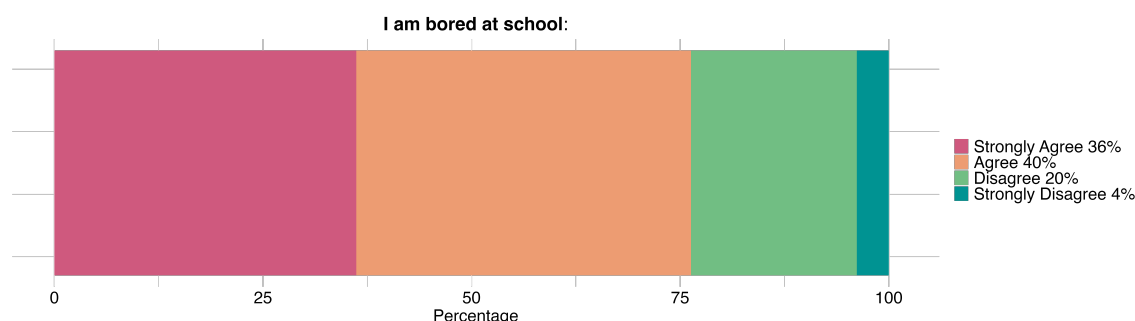
Key Findings

"I am bored at school."

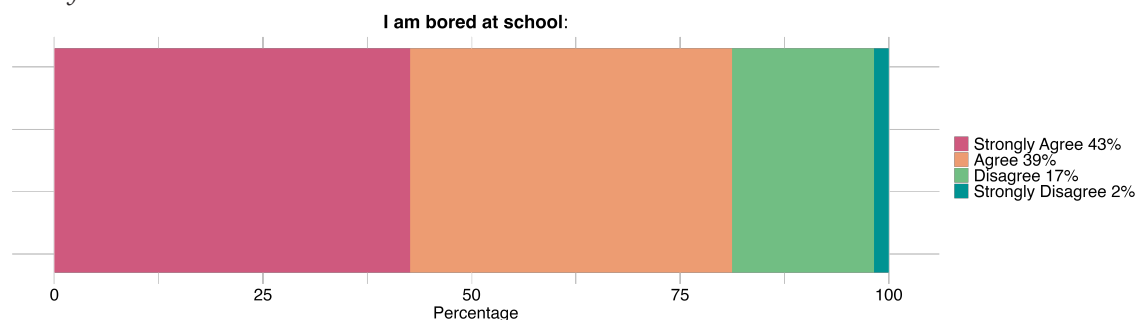
Students reported high agreement that they are bored at school. For the whole student sample, 76% strongly agreed or agreed with being bored at school. Those students who are chronically absent responded "strongly agree" or "agree" at 82%.

It is not uncommon for students to say they are bored at school, but addressing boredom on its own can be challenging. Other survey question responses may indicate where students' frustration with school lies. Students responded more positively when asked questions about their interactions with teachers and other adults at school. On the other hand, students indicated in multiple responses that the schoolwork is not interesting, that they struggle with their schoolwork or behavior, and that they also struggle to catch up if they are absent. These responses may indicate that students value and feel supported by the adults they work with, but that schoolwork is a struggle for some students.

All:



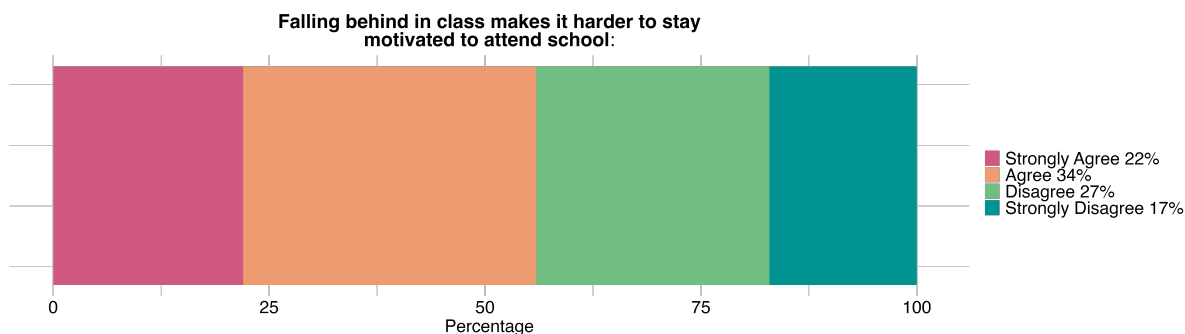
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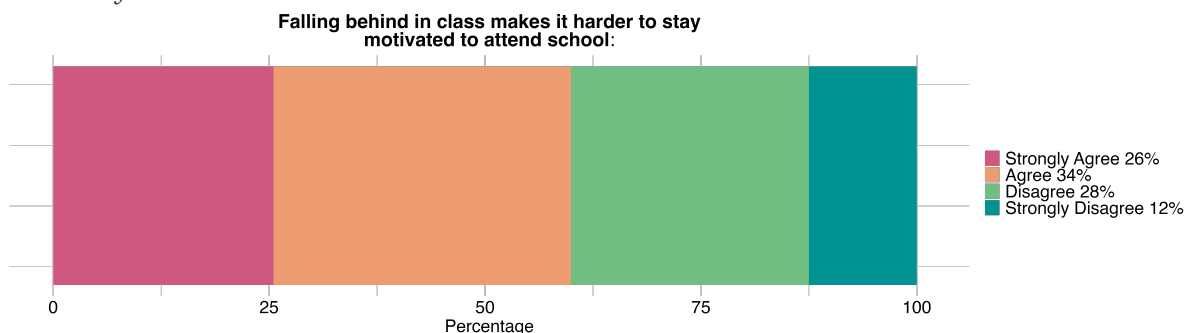
“Falling behind in class makes it harder to stay motivated to attend school.”

Students, especially those who are chronically absent, indicated that falling behind in classwork was an issue for them. The overall sample responded “strongly agree” or “agree” at 56%. Among students who are chronically absent, the responses increased to 60% who “strongly agree” or “agree.”

All:



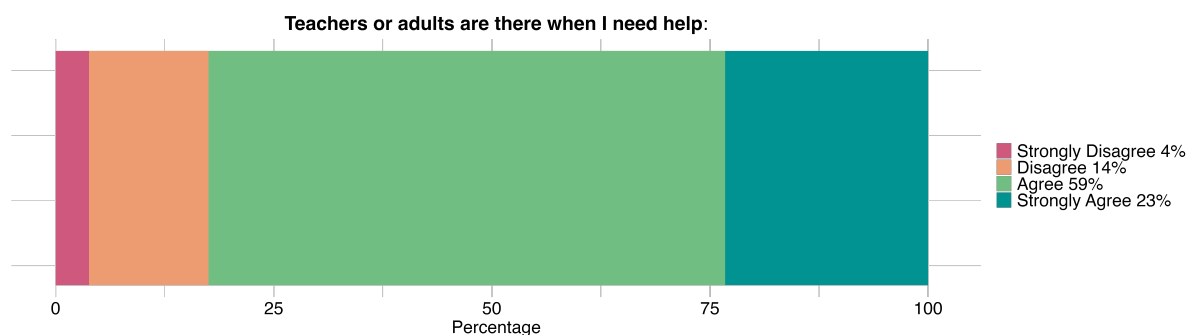
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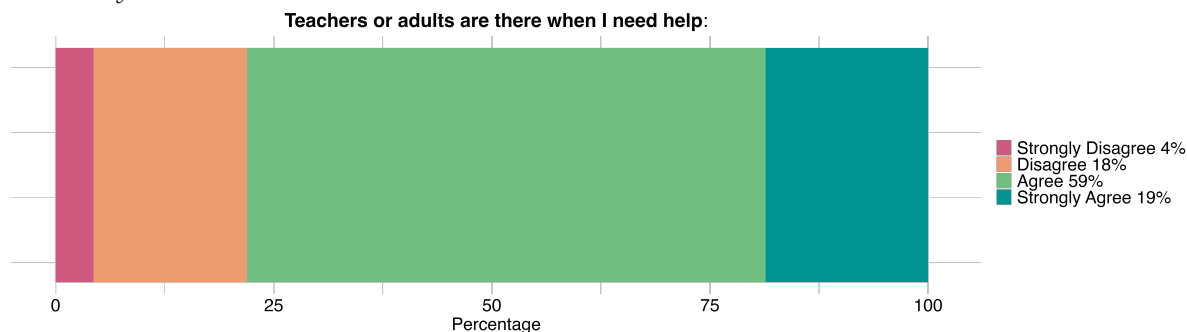
“Teachers or adults are there when I need help.”

One notable positive response was a low negative response rates when asked about the support they receive from teachers and other adults at school. Among the whole student sample, only 18% responded “strongly disagree” or “disagree” to the statement “Teachers or adults are there when I need help.” These negative response rates rose slightly among students who are chronically absent, with 22% who responded “strongly disagree” or “disagree.”

All:



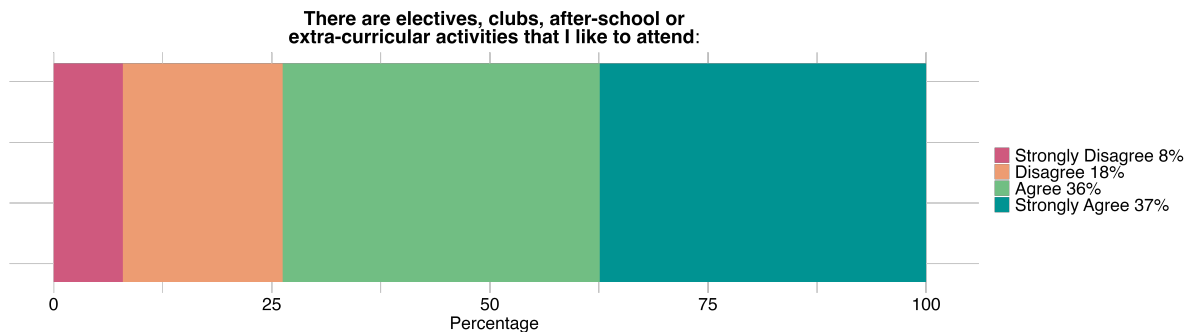
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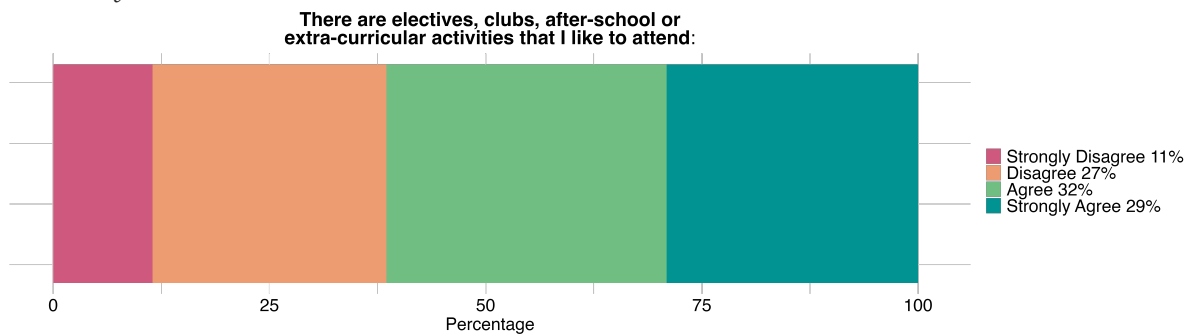
“There are electives, clubs, after-school or extra-curricular activities that I like to attend.”

Students were also asked about non-core classes and activities at school. Across the entire student sample, 26% strongly disagreed or disagreed with the statement “There are electives, clubs, after-school or extra-curricular activities that I like to attend.” For students who are chronically absent, these negative responses increased to 38%.

All:



Chronically Absent:



Misconceptions

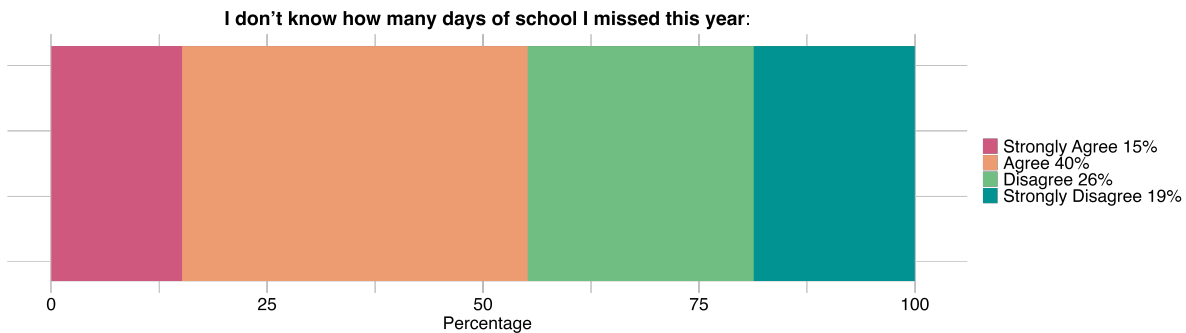
This category of questions seeks to better understand students' conceptions of attendance, the importance of attending school regularly, and if they are aware of how many days they are absent. Students and their families may have different views on when it is acceptable to be absent, how many absences are within a reasonable range, or how important school attendance is generally.

Key Findings

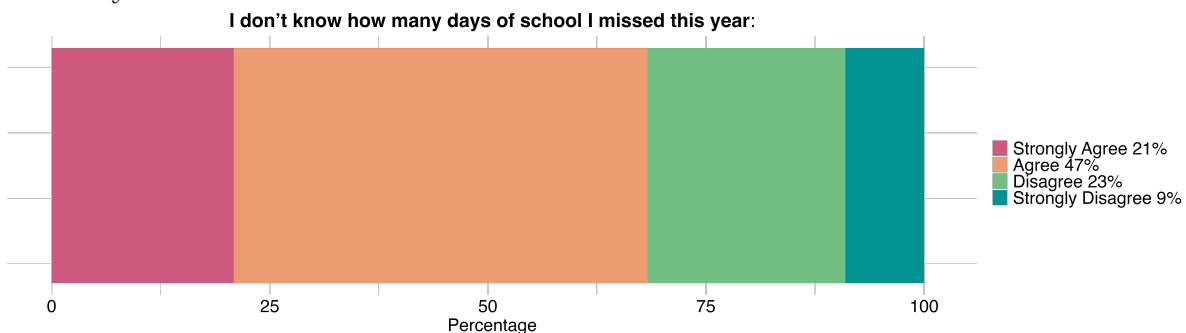
"I don't know how many days of school I missed this year."

The whole student sample responded "strongly agree" or "agree" at 55% to the statement "I don't know how many days of school I missed this year." Among students who are chronically absent, these rates are more pronounced, with 68% responding "strongly agree" or "agree." Based on these responses, students do not know how their absences accumulate over the year.

All:



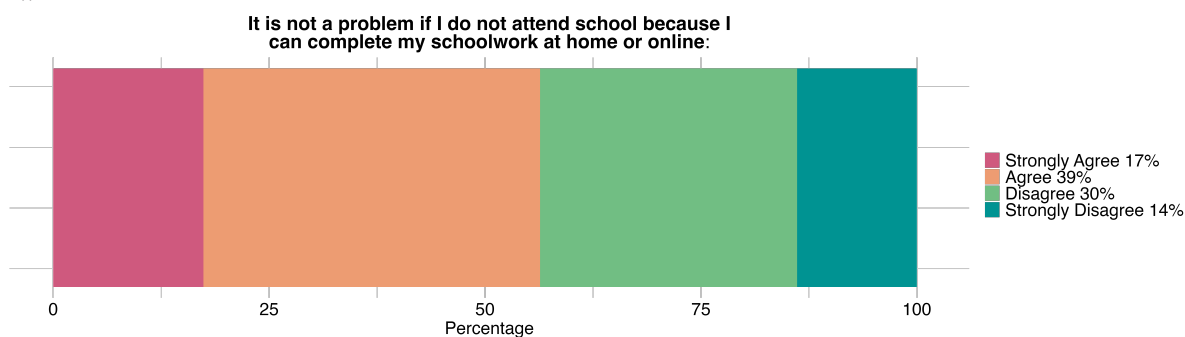
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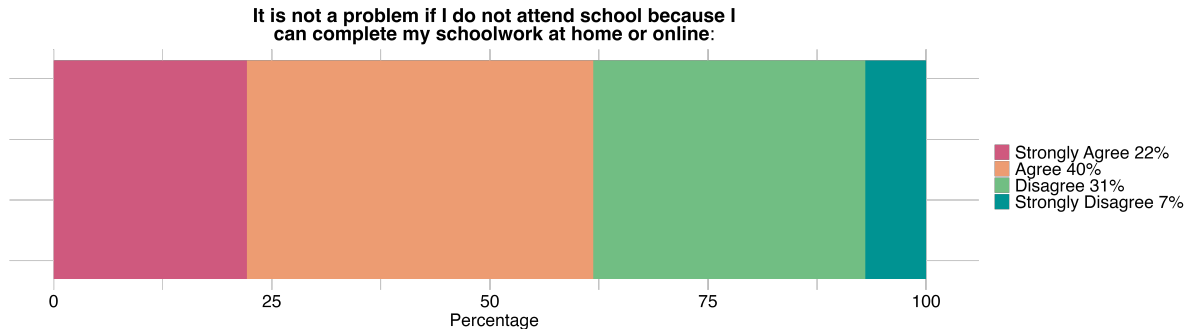
“It is not a problem if I do not attend school because I can complete my schoolwork at home or online.”

The overall student group strongly agreed and agreed with the statement “It is not a problem if I do not attend school because I can complete my schoolwork at home or online” at a rate of 56%, respectively. The students who are chronically absent agreed at slightly higher rates with 62% who responded “strongly agree” or “agree.” These responses may also indicate low engagement in class if students can complete assignments without being present.

All:



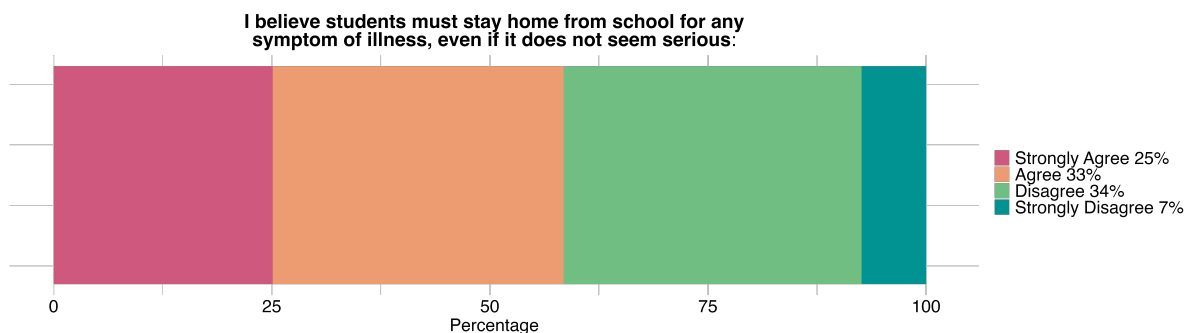
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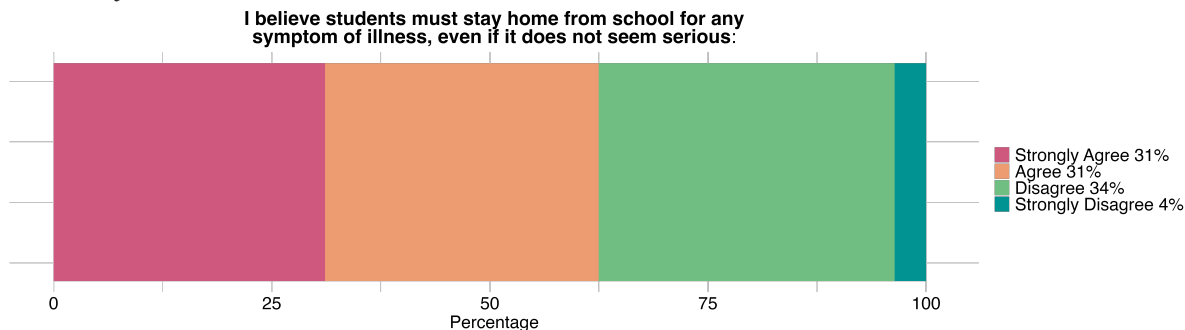
“I believe students must stay home from school for any symptom of illness, even if it does not seem serious.”

Students, both in the general student sample and those who are chronically absent, agreed with the statement at high rates, indicating that students with even minor noncontagious symptoms are staying home. The general student sample responded “strongly agree” or “agree” at 58%. The sample of students who were chronically absent responded “strongly agree” or “agree” at 62%.

All:



Chronically Absent:



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Policy Recommendations

Update Students and Families on Attendance: Both students who are chronically absent and the full student group responded that they were unsure how many days of school they missed, indicating that students and families may not be aware of how absences accumulate over time. To address this, schools districts should provide **regular updates** to students and families on total absences and on whether they are approaching the chronic absenteeism threshold.

Guidance on When to Stay Home: Chronically absent students with higher absenteeism were more likely to report missing school due to minor illnesses and to believe they should stay home for mild symptoms (e.g., slight cough or runny nose). We recommend providing clear, accessible guidance to students and families on when it is appropriate to attend school versus stay home, which could help reduce unnecessary absences.

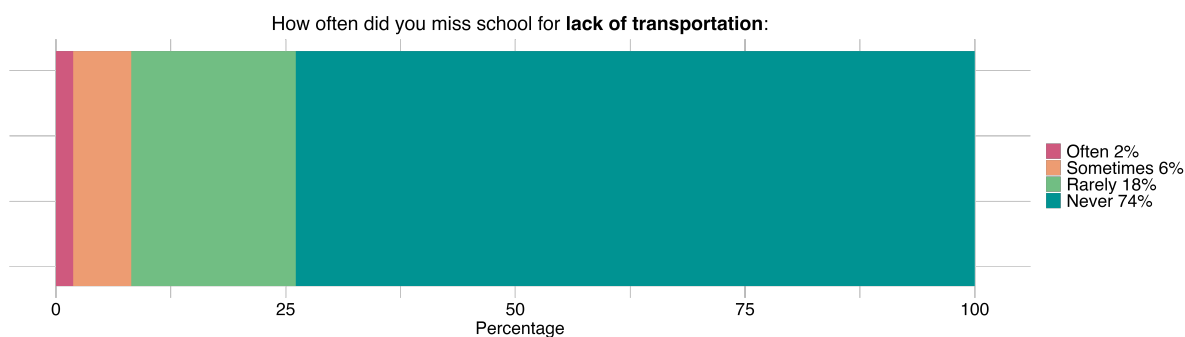
Outreach for Students with High Absenteeism: Students identified as chronically absent self-reported higher rates of anxiety and struggles with schoolwork and behavior. Absenteeism is often a symptom of other issues for students. We recommend that a counselor, social worker, or another staff member trusted by the student meet with students who have high rates of absenteeism to better understand other challenges the student may be facing.

Student Engagement: Students responded positively about the adults they work with, but they were more negative about their schoolwork. They responded at high rates that they are bored, do not find their schoolwork interesting or challenging, and that it is difficult to stay motivated when they fall behind in class. School leadership teams and teacher leads should meet and discuss strategies to promote student engagement in class. Educators should consider including students in these conversations.

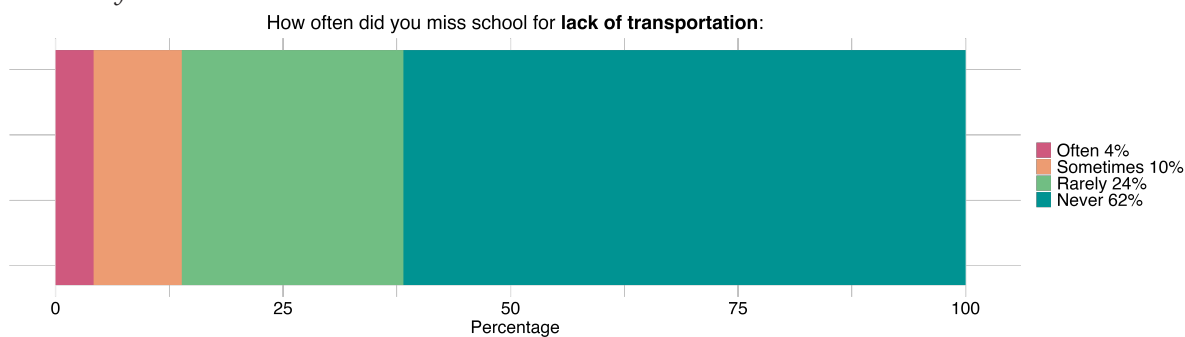
Appendix

Barriers

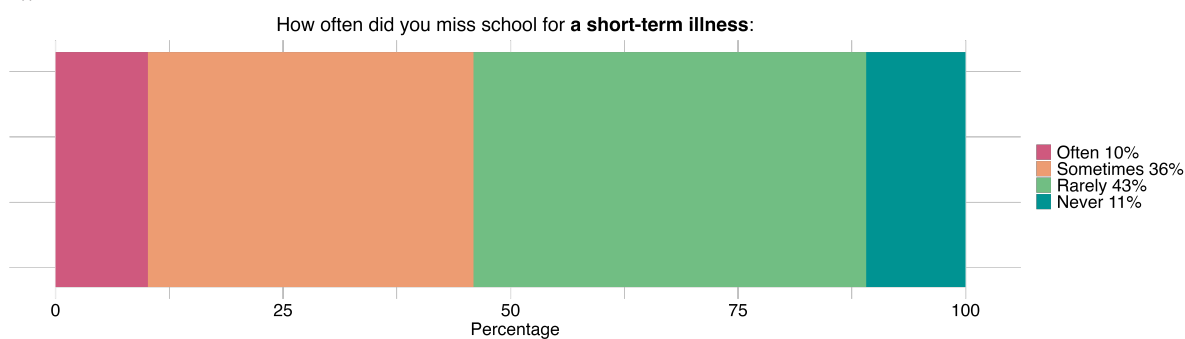
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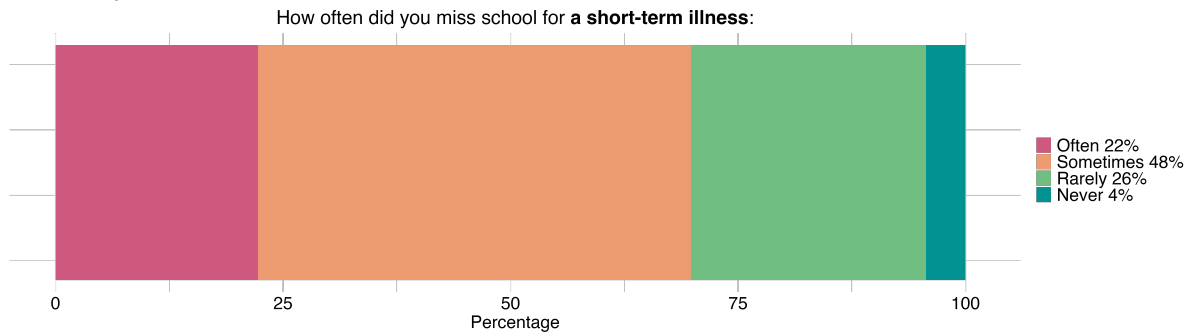
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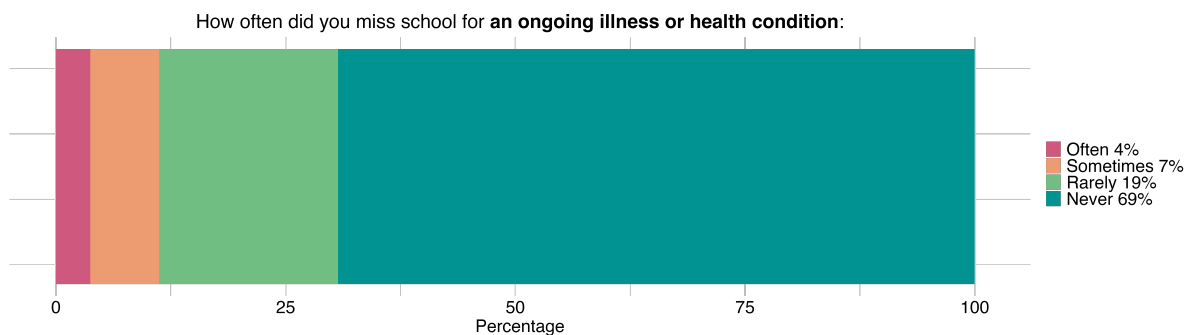
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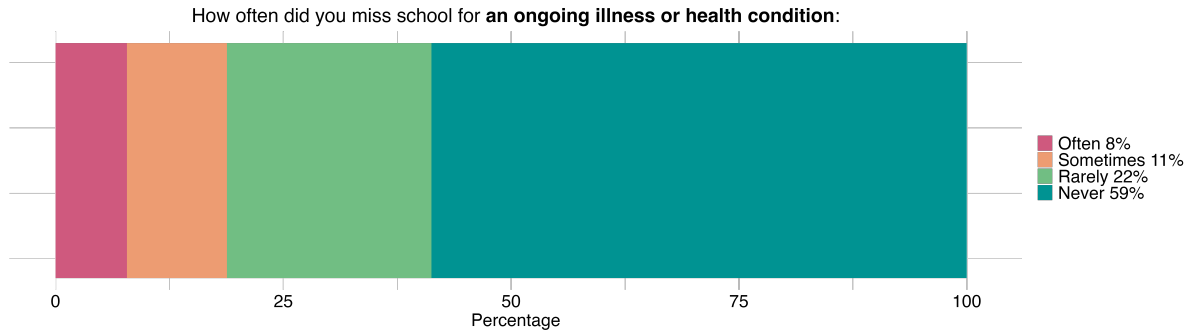
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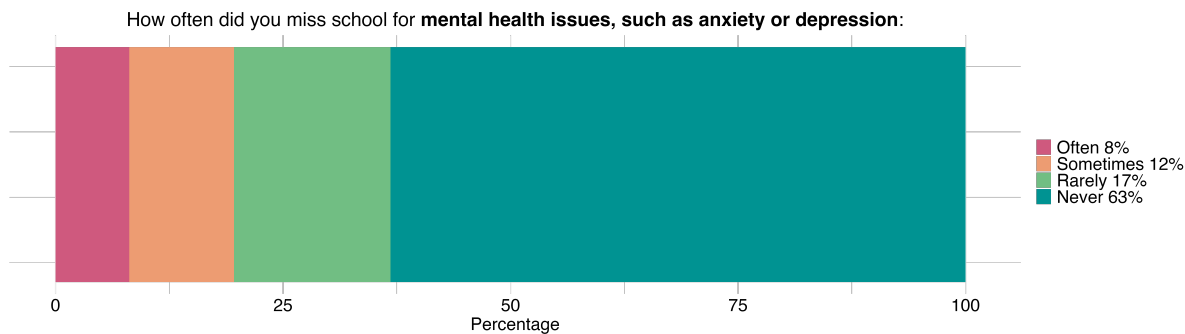
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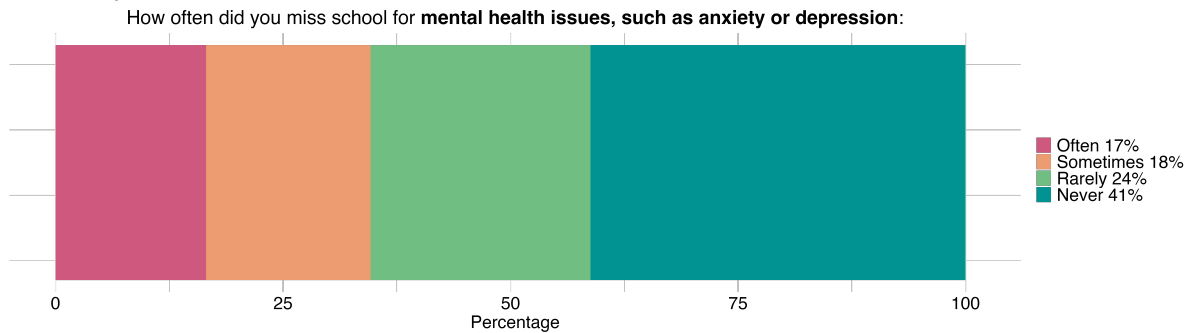
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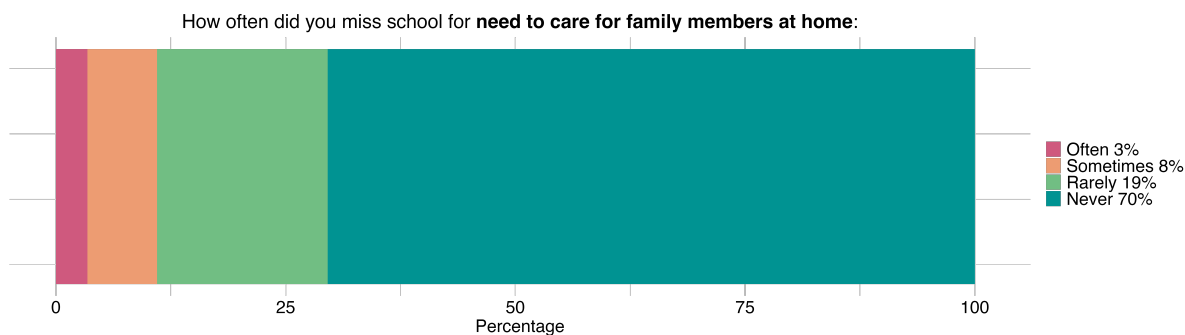
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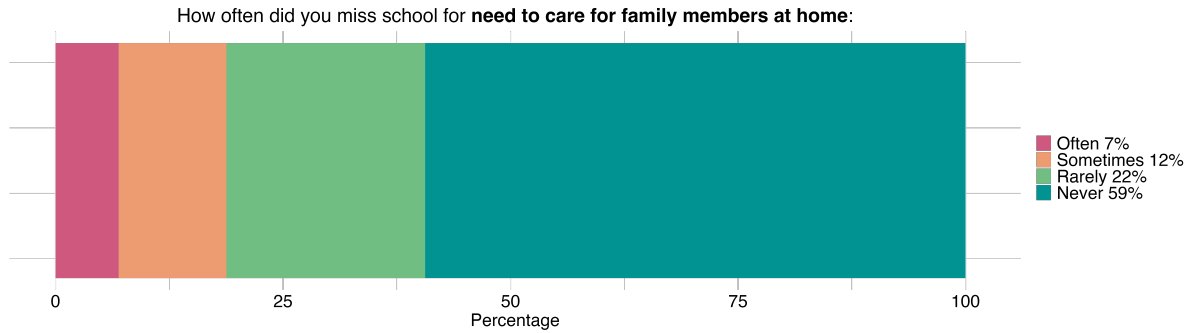
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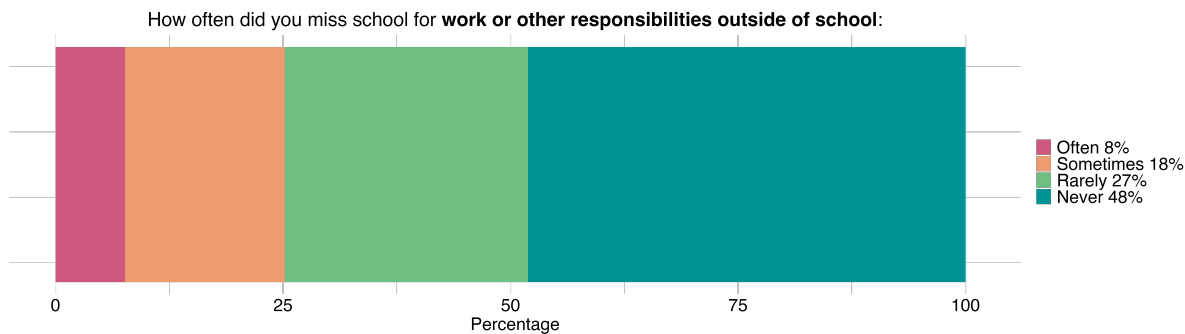
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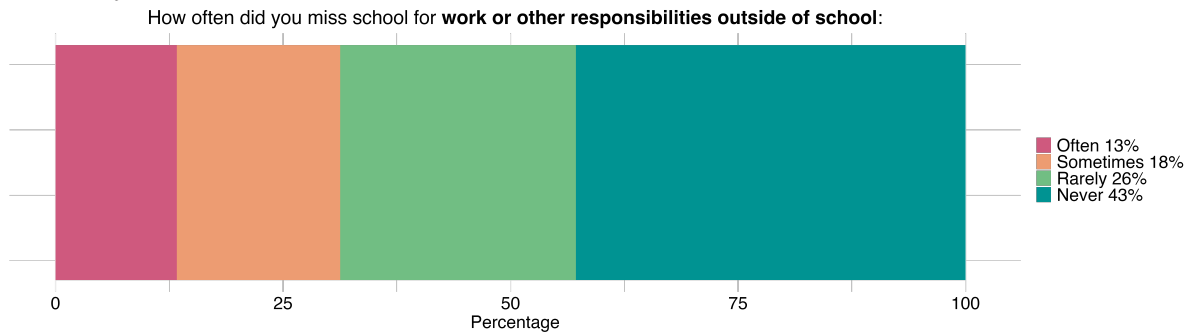
Chronically Absent:



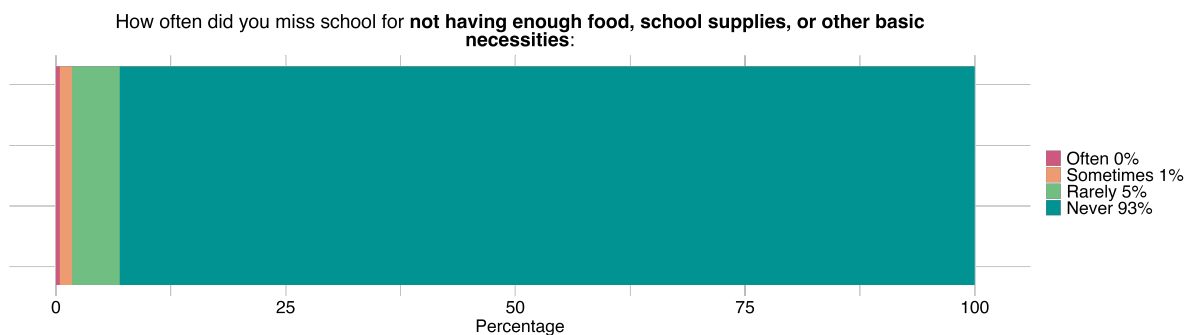
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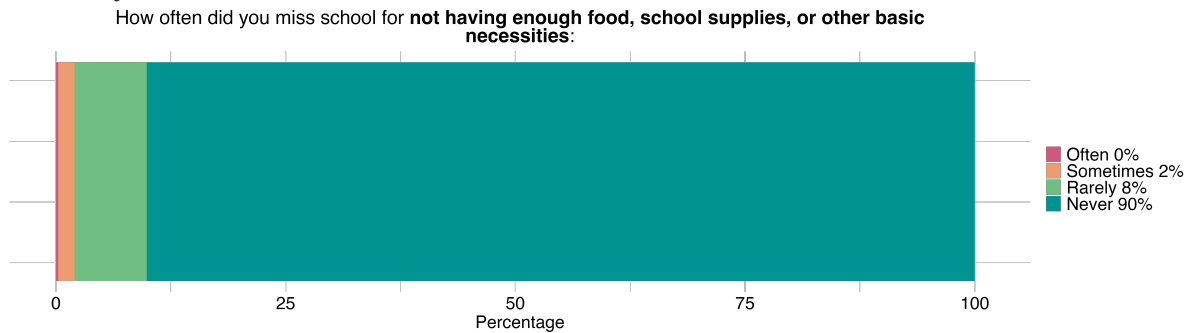
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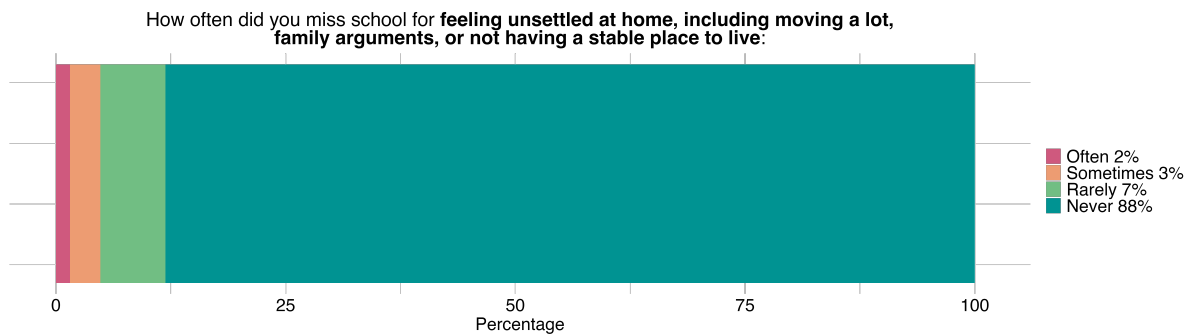
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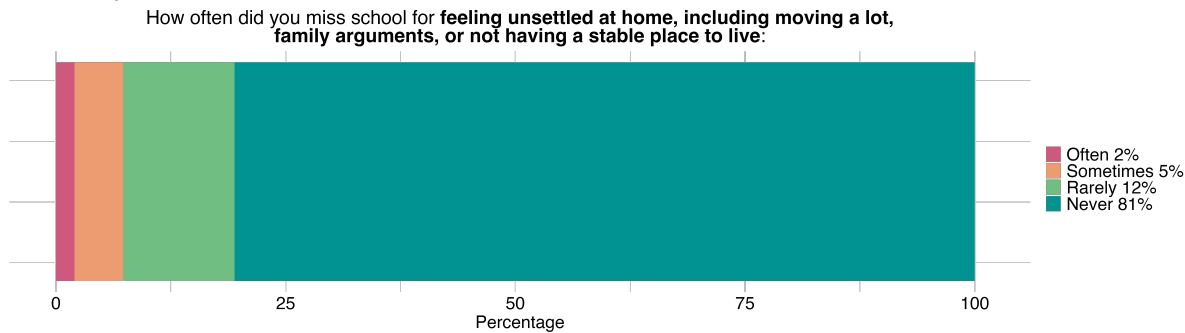
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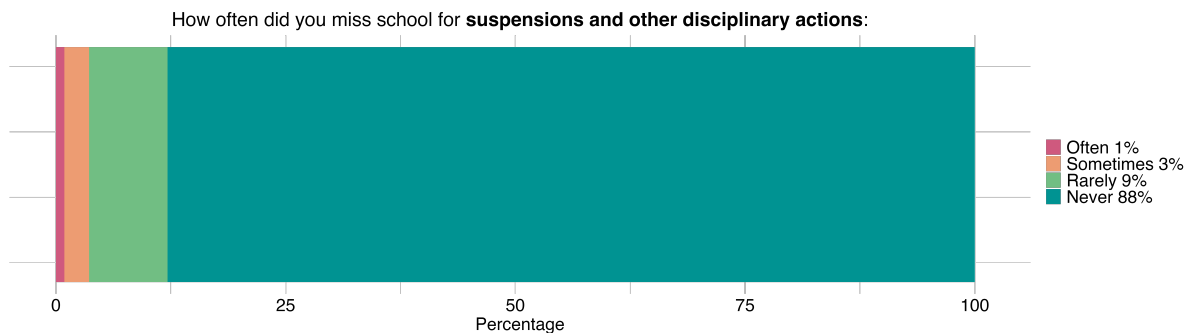
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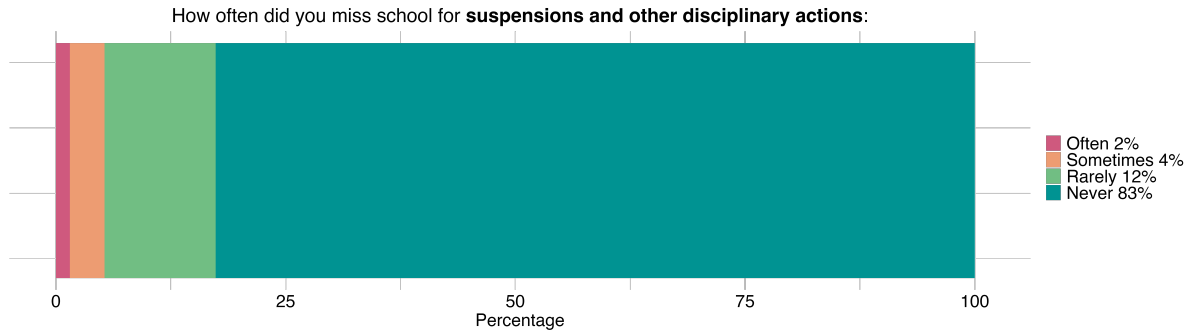
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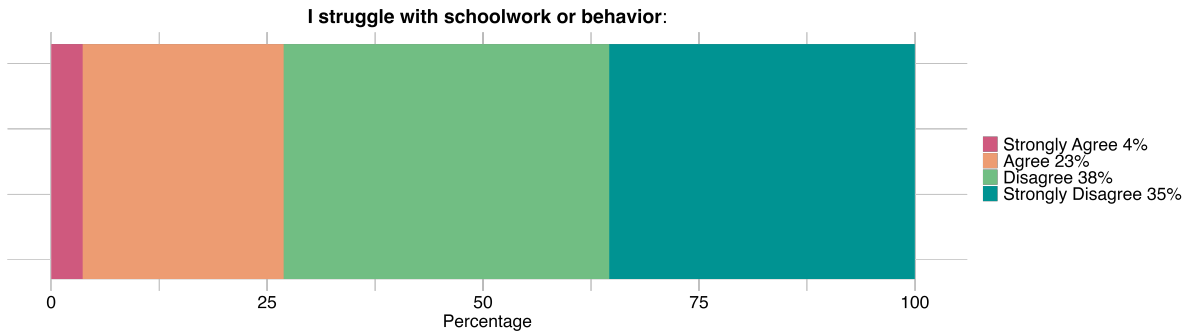


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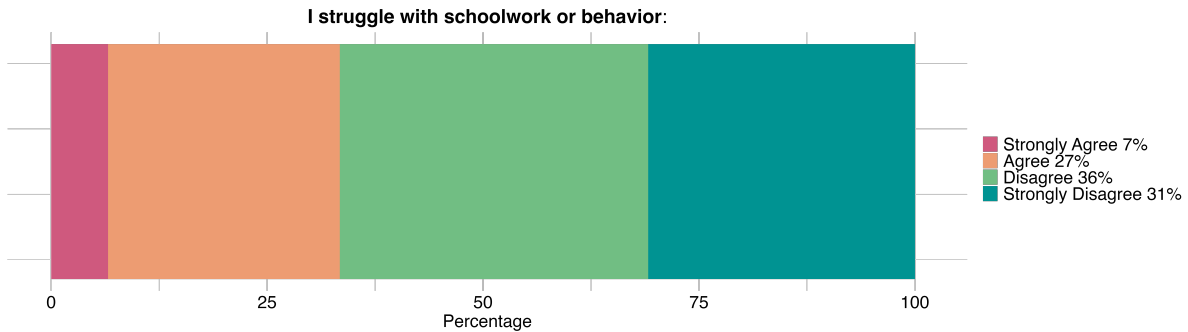


Aversions

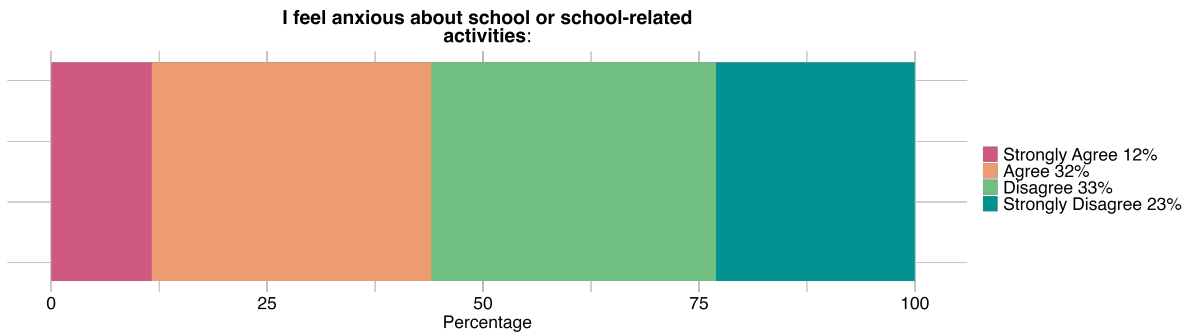
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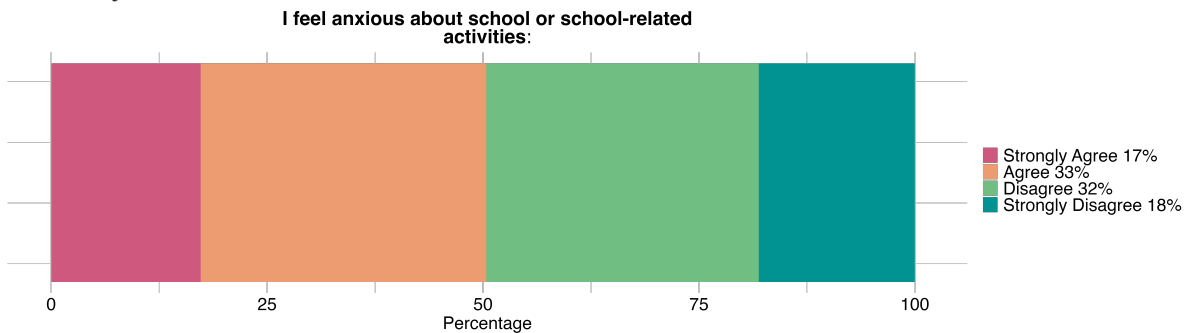
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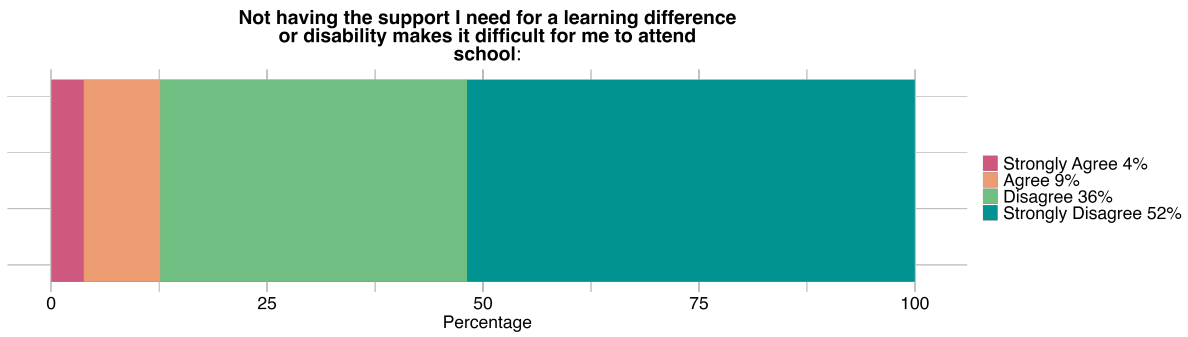
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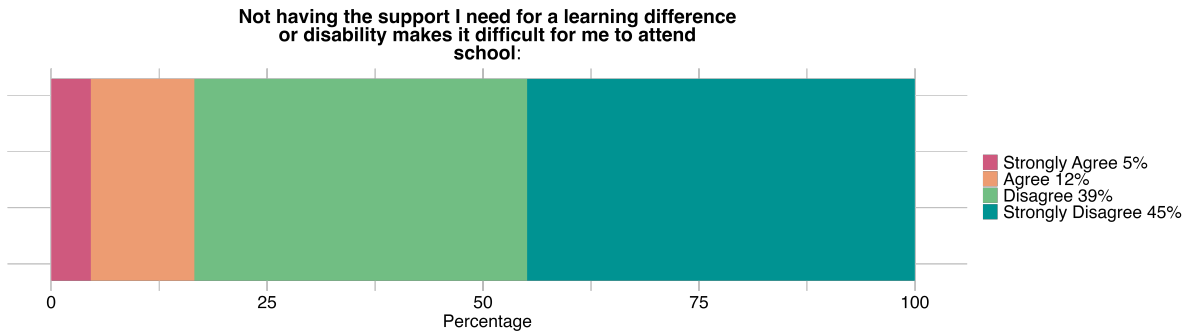
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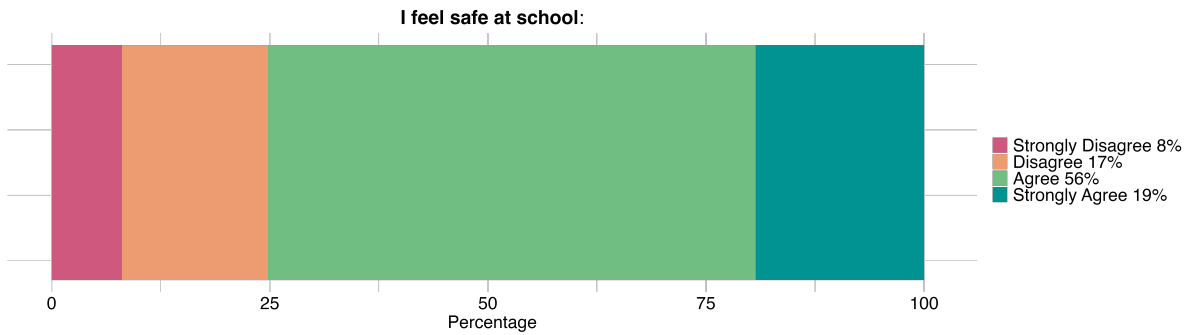
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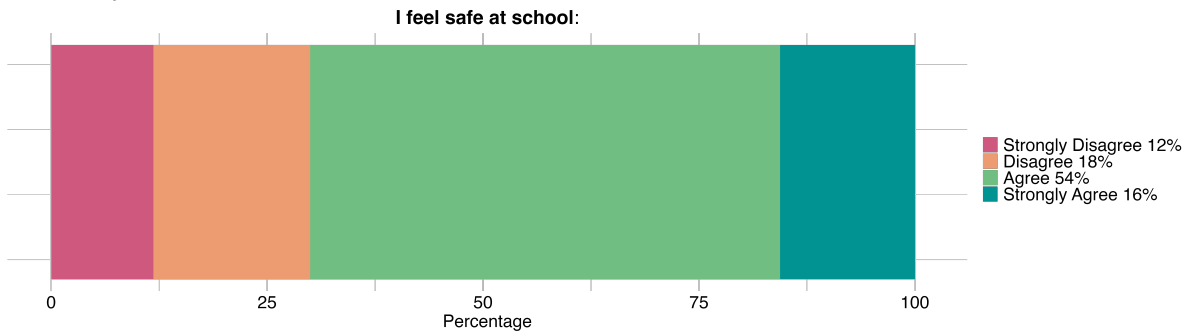
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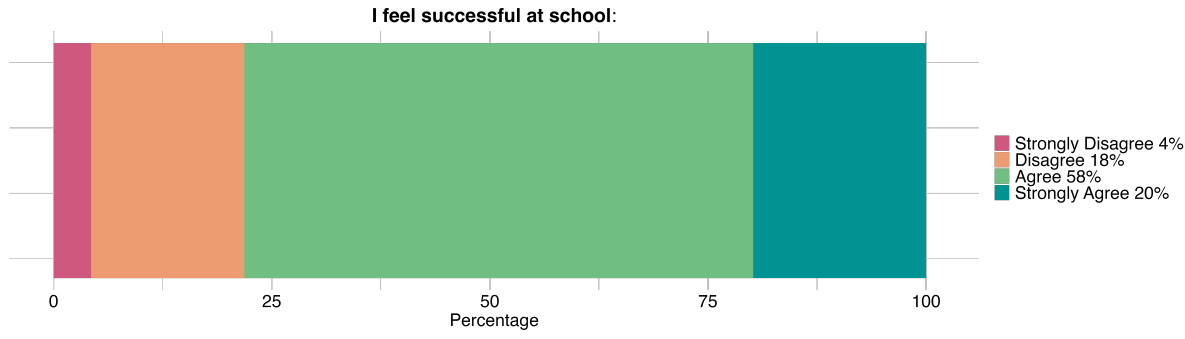
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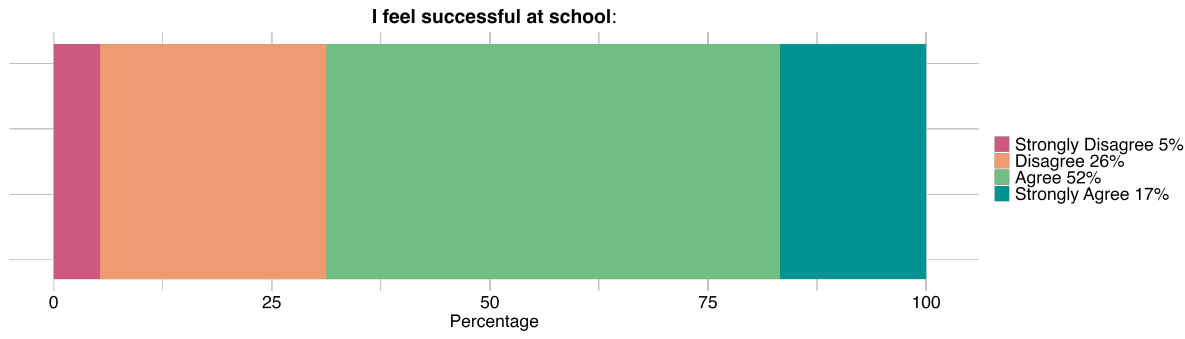
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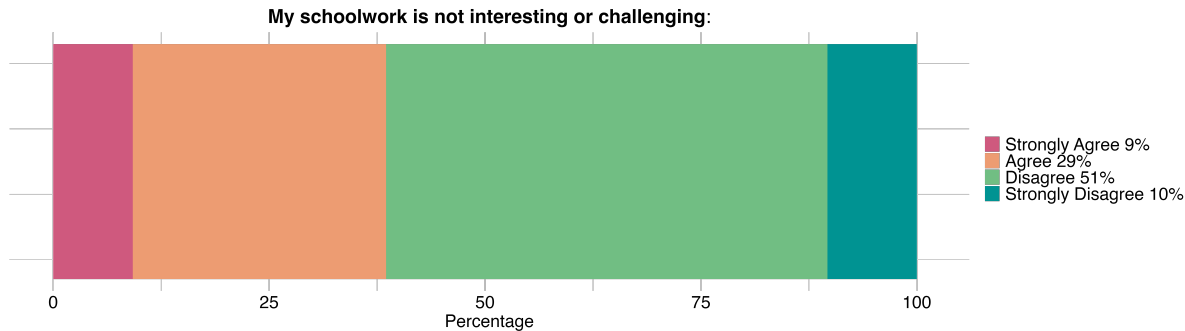


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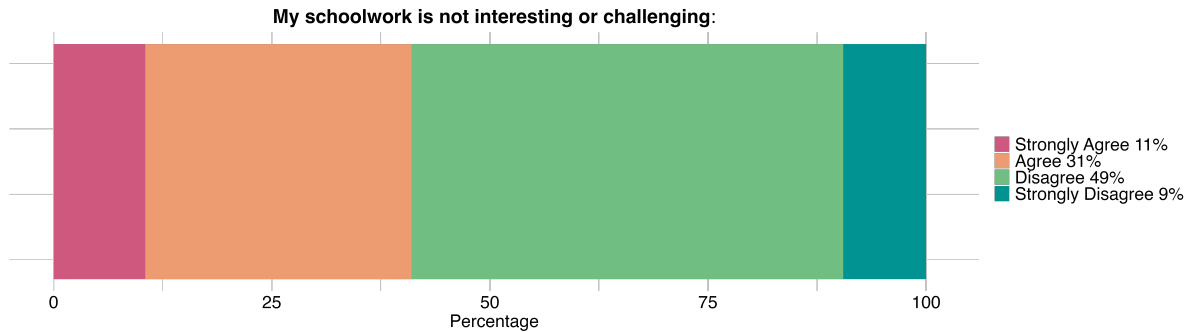


Disengagement

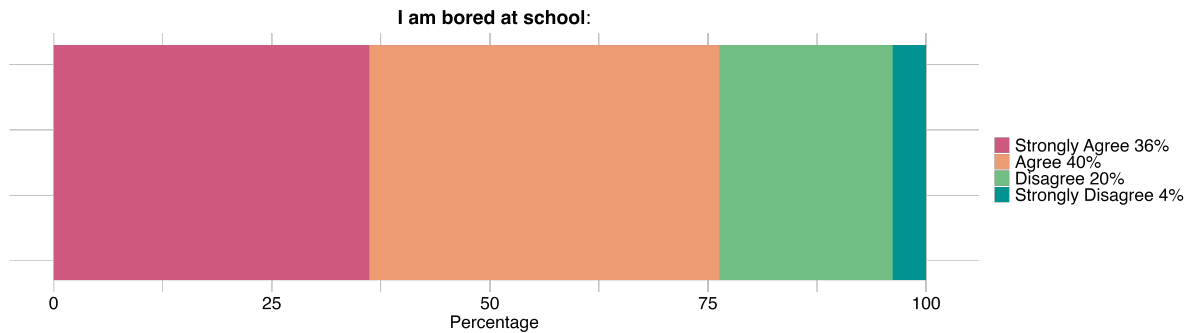
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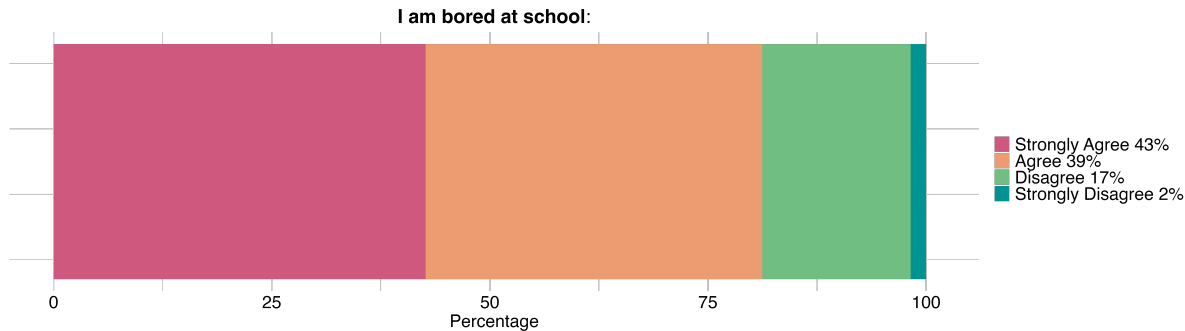
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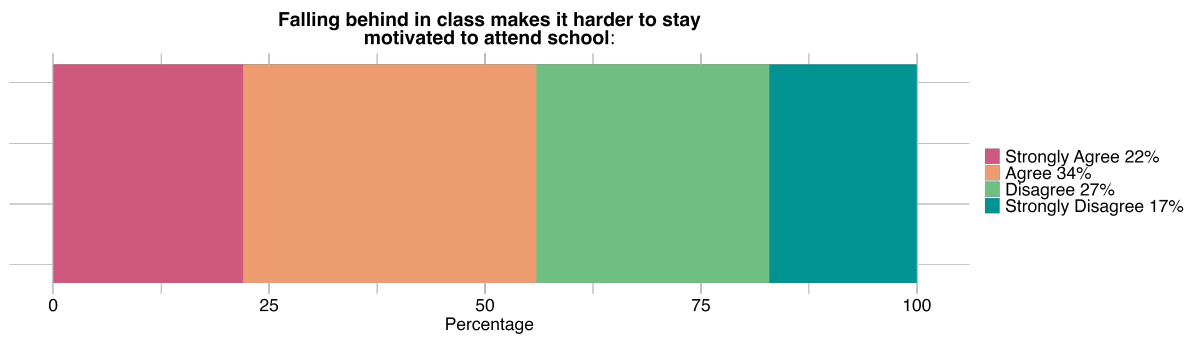
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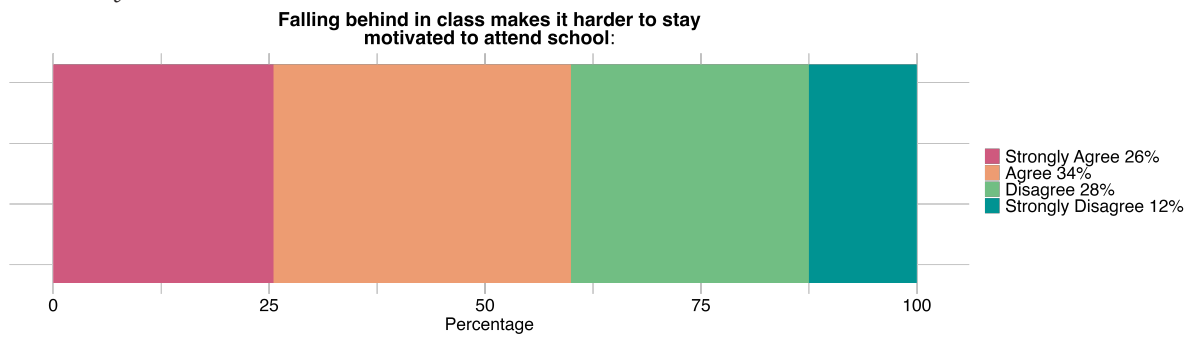
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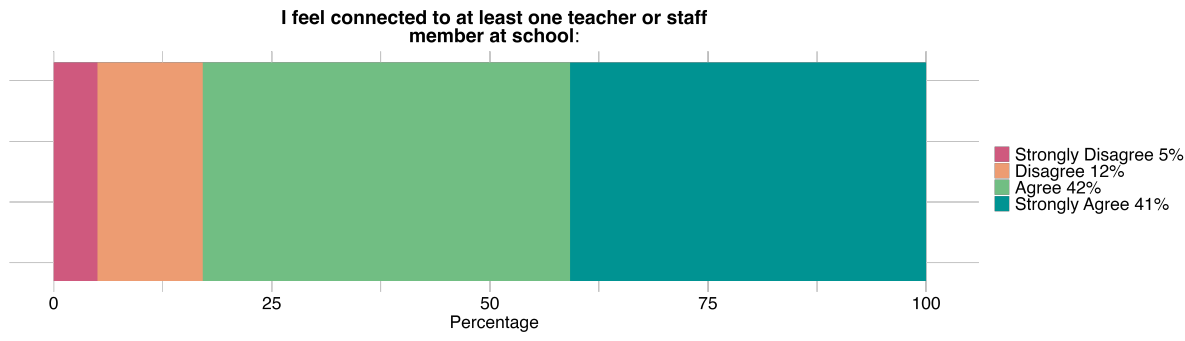
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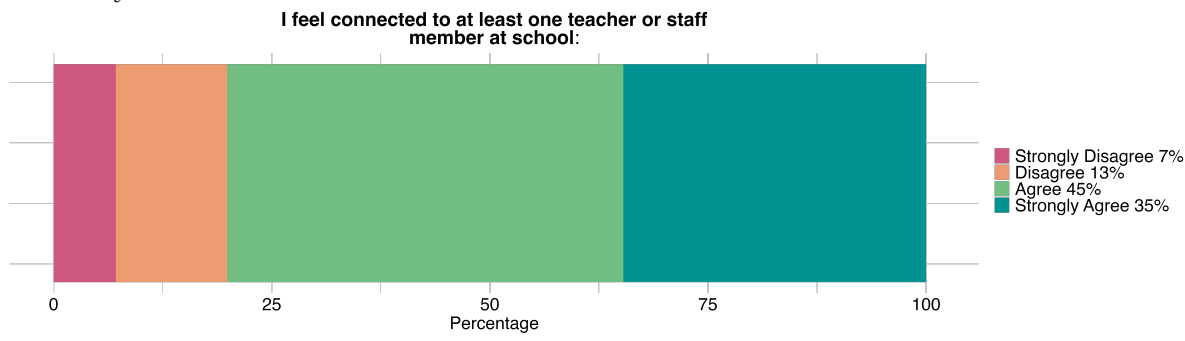
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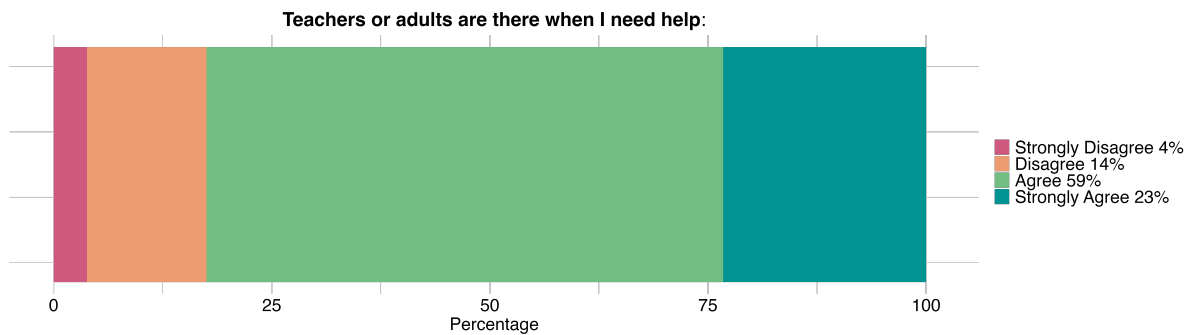
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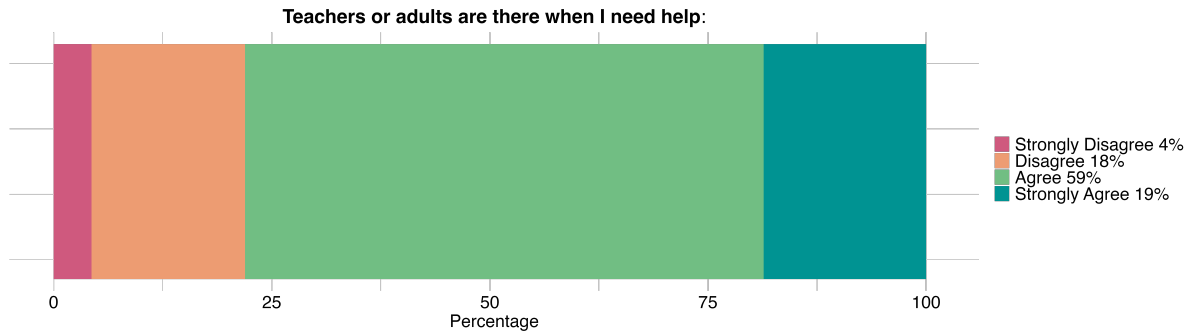
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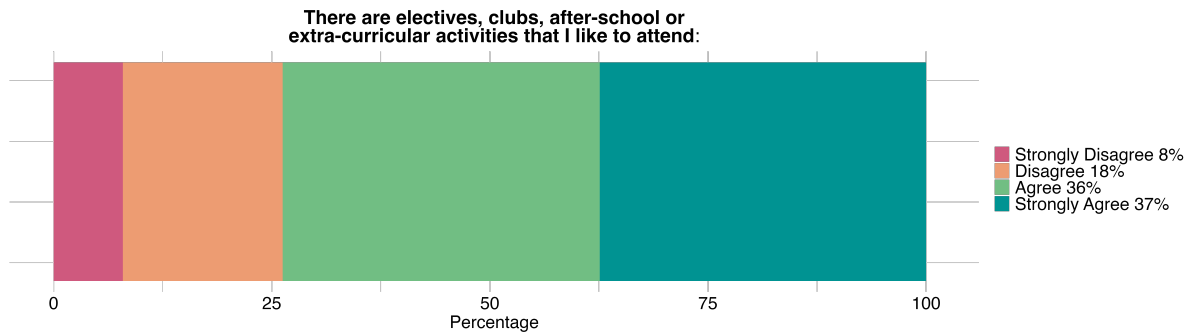
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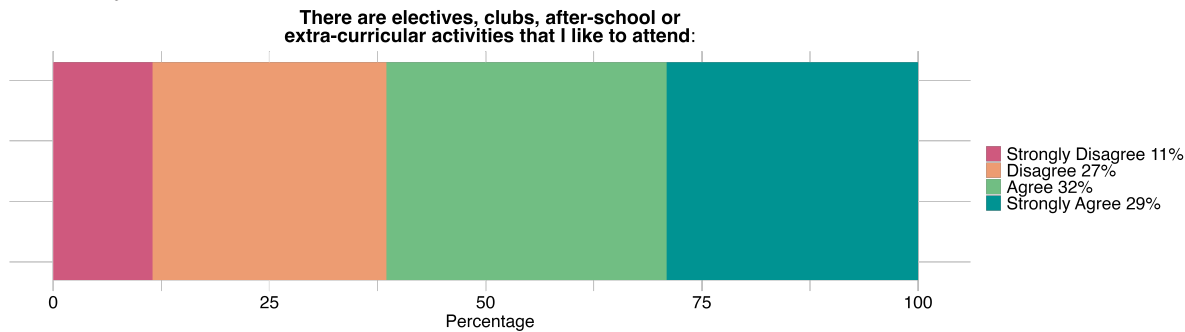
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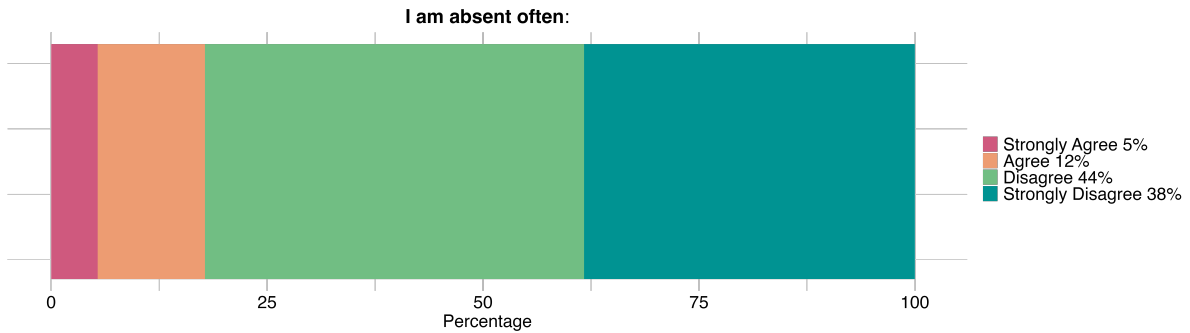


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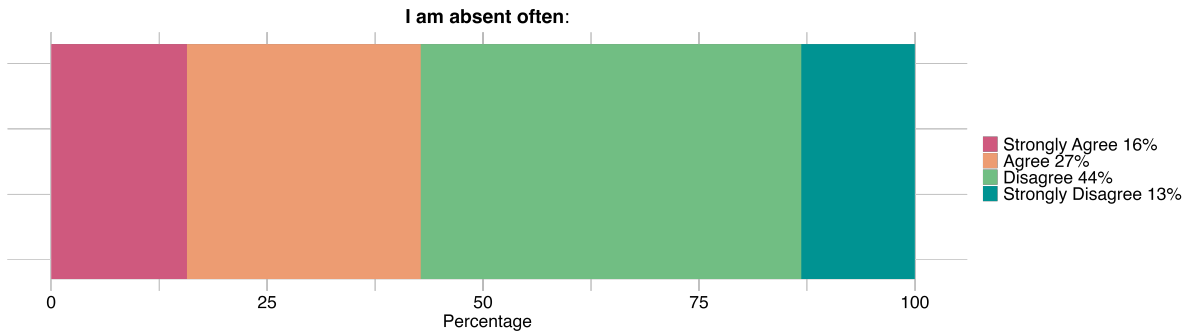


Misconceptions

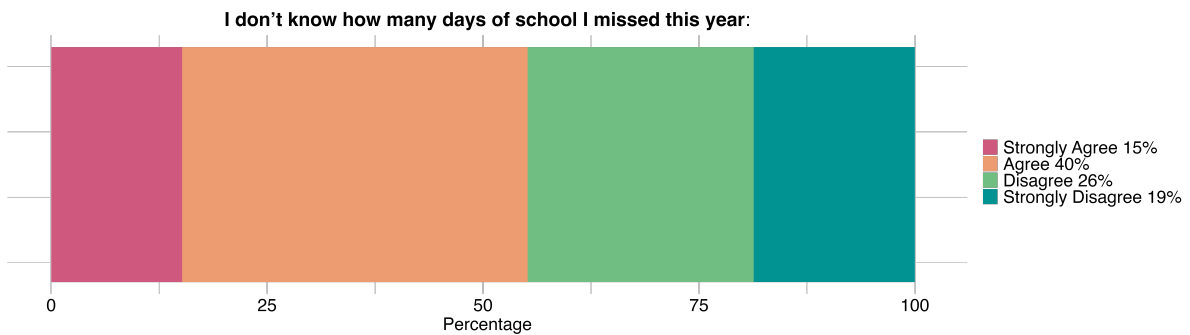
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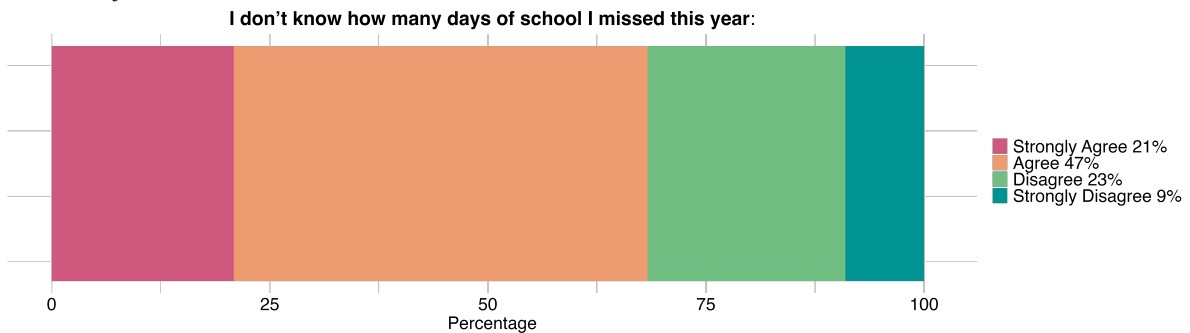
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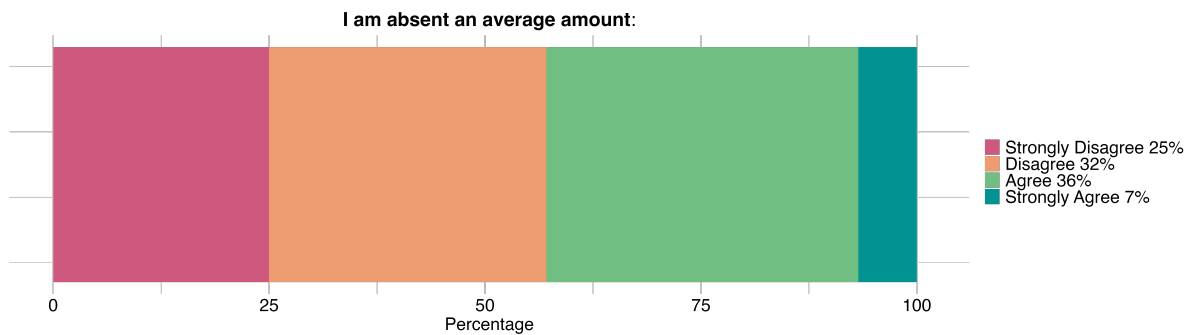
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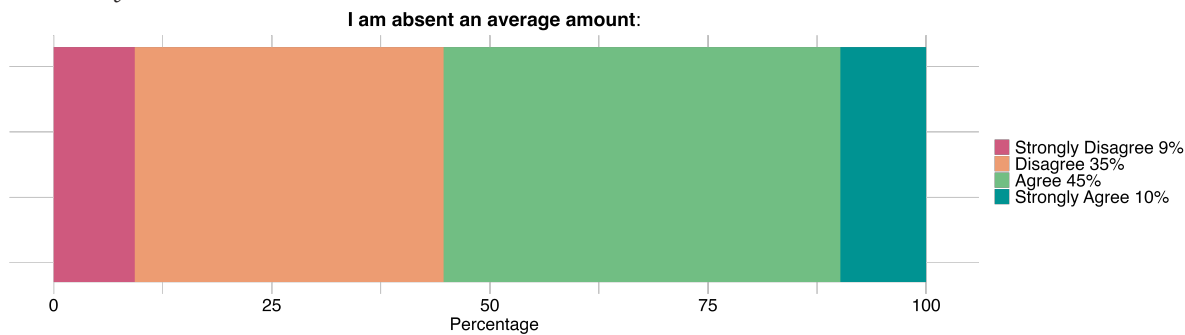
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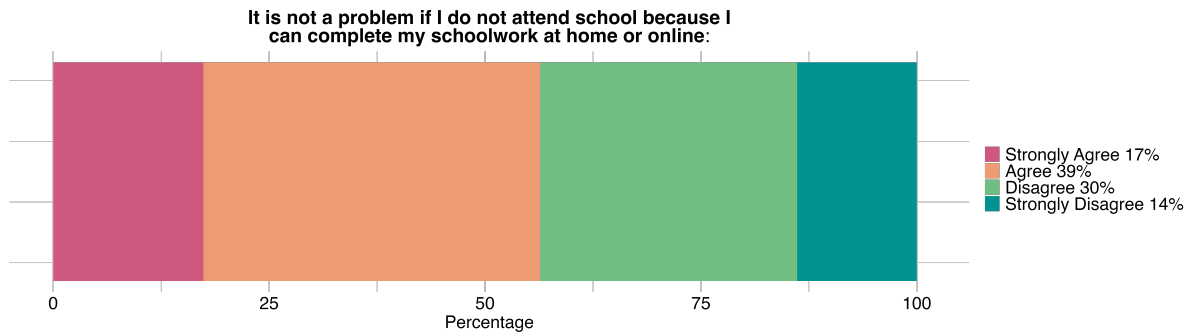
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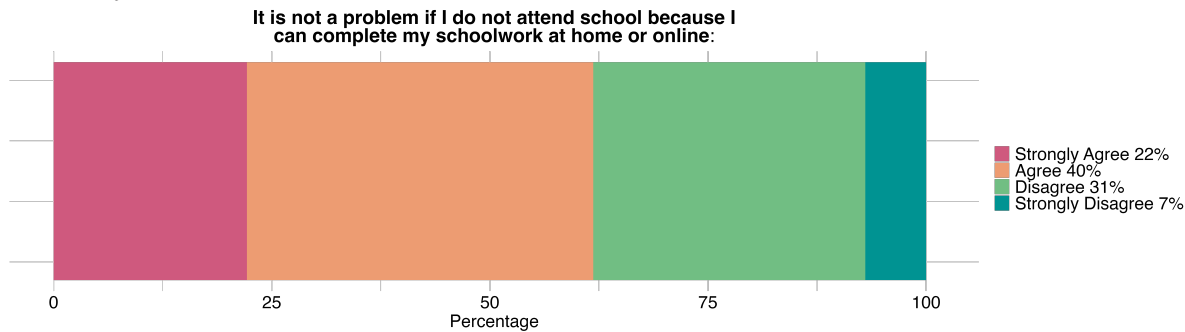
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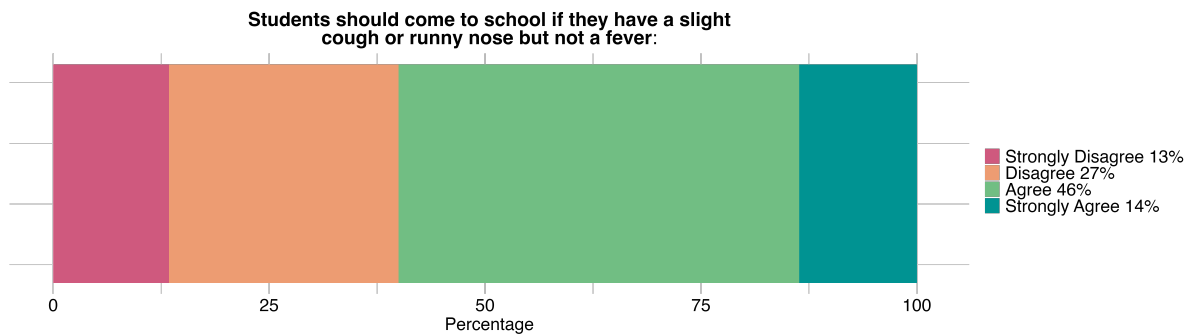
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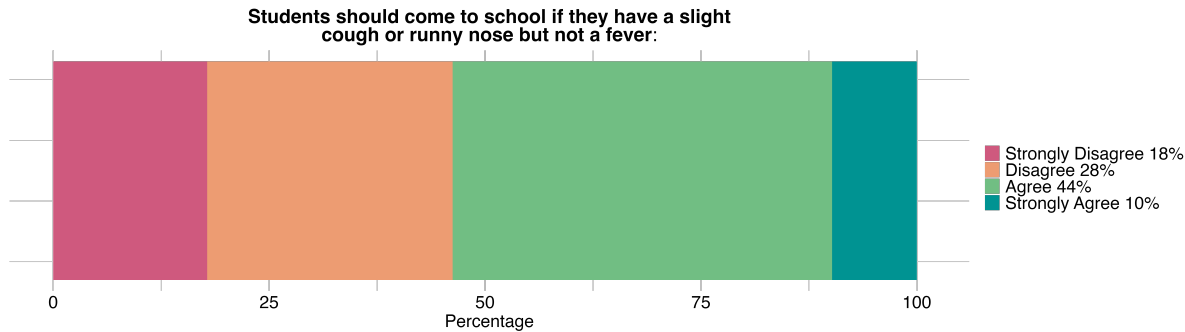
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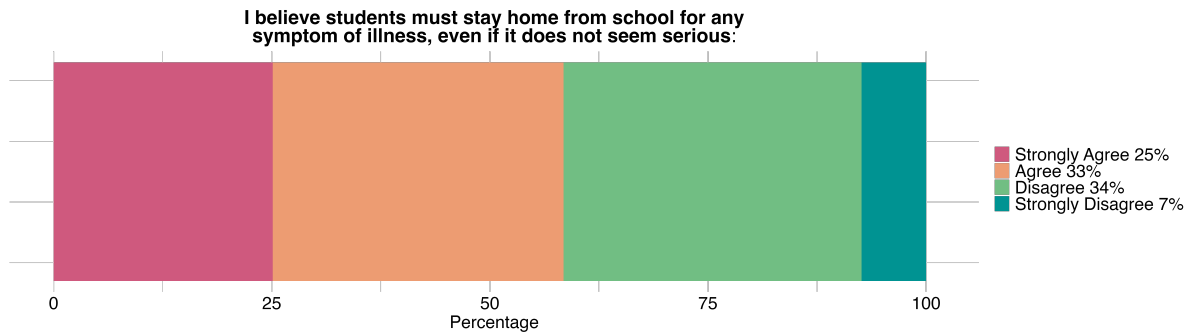
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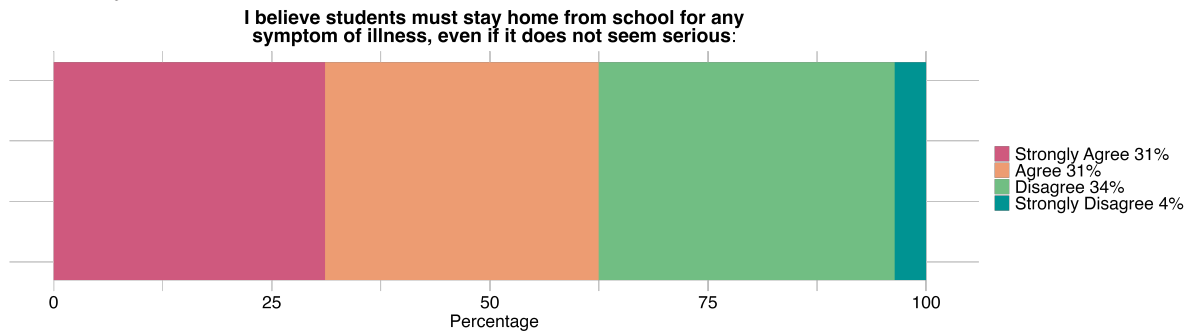
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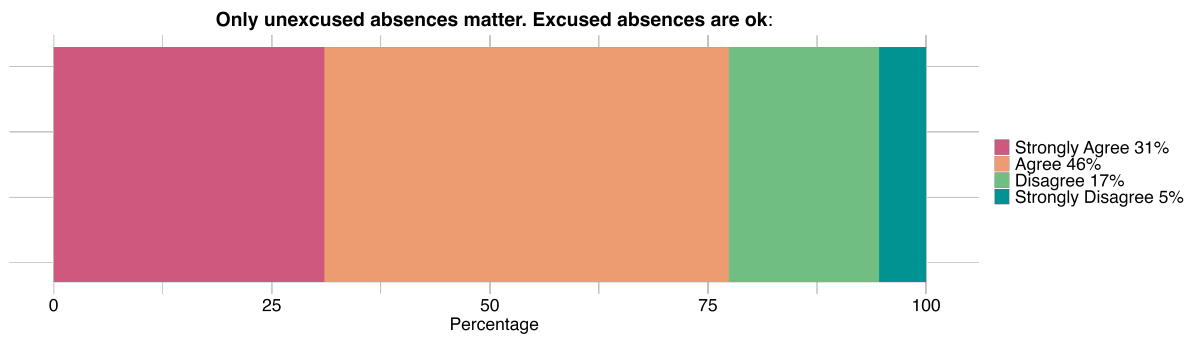
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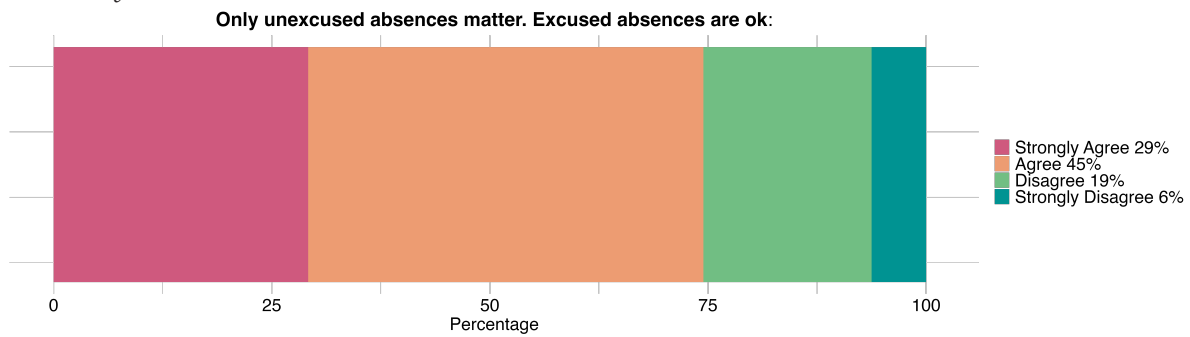
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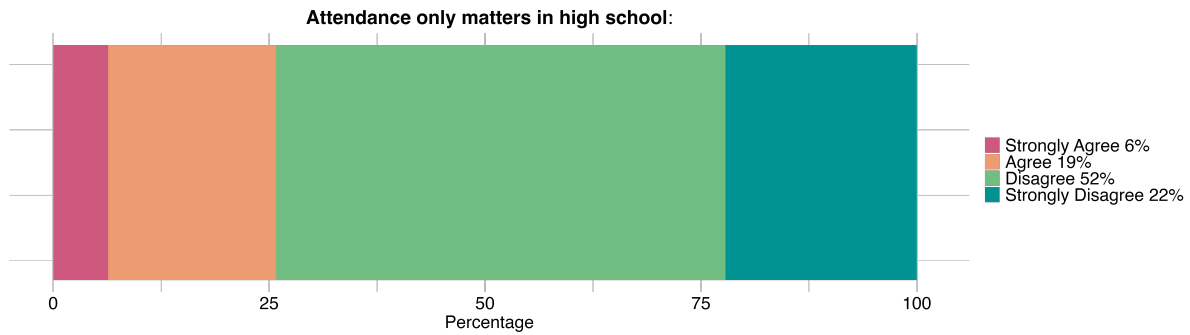
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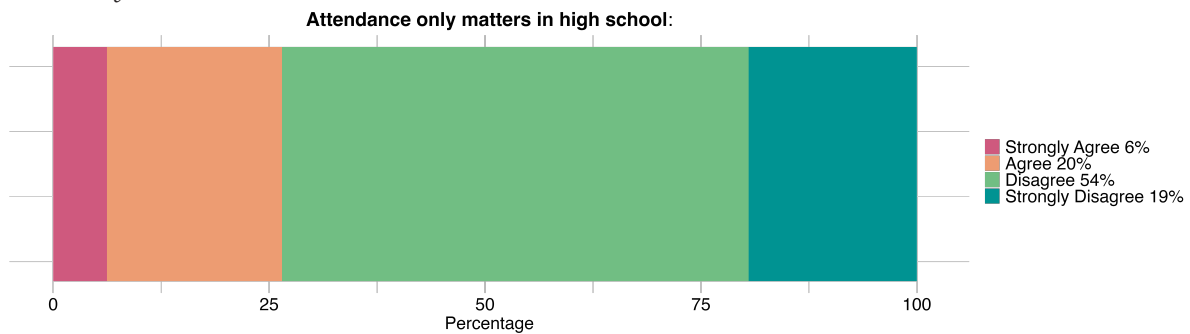
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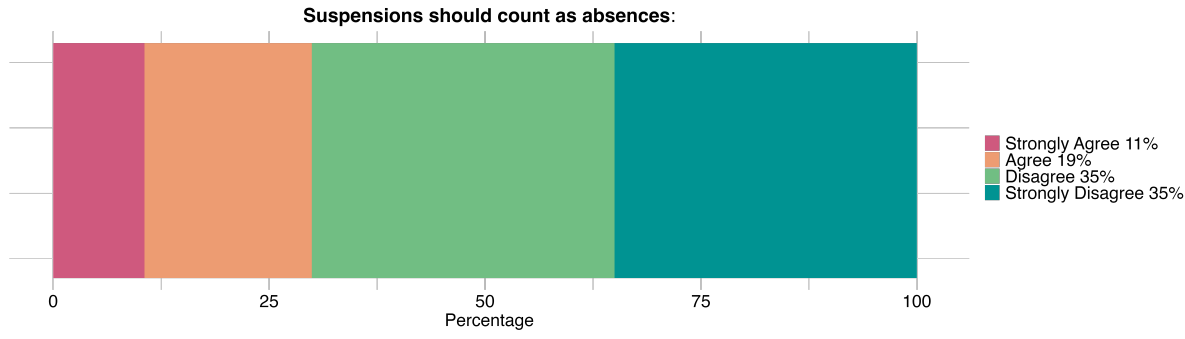
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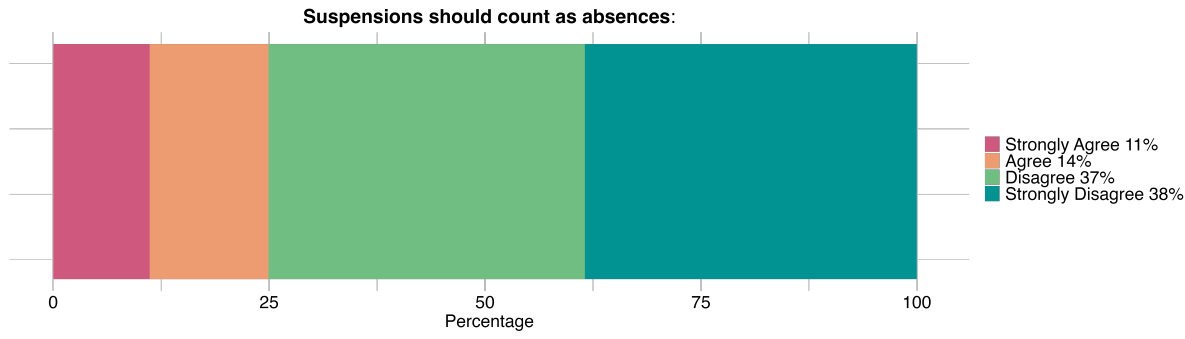
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