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## School Attendance: Landscape Review

Attendance is a fundamental issue to address in New Mexico's education system. With schools experiencing soaring chronic absenteeism rates that worsened during the Covid-19 pandemic, it is critical the state finds meaningful solutions to support students being in school. Every single day a student misses school represents a lost opportunity for students to learn and for educators to provide instruction and guidance. For public education systems to meet their ultimate purpose of readying students for college, career, and civic life, it is imperative students are present at school.

This policy brief provides an overview of why school attendance matters, presents data about the depth of the chronic absenteeism challenge in New Mexico schools, and offers a summary of the state's Attendance for Success Act.

### School Attendance: Why It Matters and Where New Mexico Stands

#### The Impact of Chronic Absence

Chronic absenteeism, defined in New Mexico as missing 10 percent or more of the school year for any reason, negatively affects students in myriad ways.

*Missing 10 percent of school equates to missing two school days every month, or 18 days—more than three full weeks—over a 180-day school year.*

Since 2008, the body of research on attendance and chronic absenteeism has grown, with studies consistently finding students who are chronically absent experience numerous adverse impacts. Attendance Works, a national organization focused on reducing chronic absenteeism, has produced several [research publications](#) showing chronic absence associated with lower achievement throughout a student's academic life: a lack of initial school readiness, falling behind in early literacy and numeracy in elementary grades, greater grade-level retention, failing middle school courses, dropping out of high school, and showing less persistence in college.

The impact of chronic absenteeism often builds over time, with those showing chronic absenteeism in earlier grades having lower levels of success in later grades and also being more likely to drop out of high school.

### Key Takeaways

School attendance and chronic absence affect nearly every student outcome, largely harming students.

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Chronic absenteeism is defined as missing 10 percent or more of school.

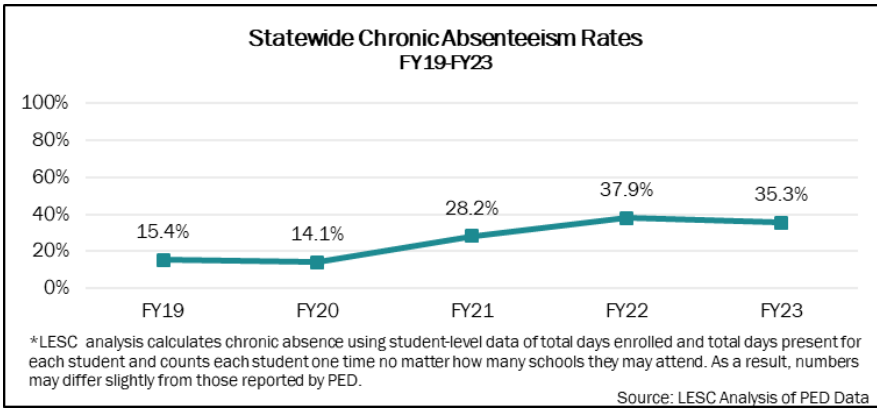
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New Mexico's chronic absenteeism rate was 40 percent for the 2021-2022 school year. Initial LESC analysis shows a chronic absenteeism rate of 35 percent for the 2022-2023 school year.

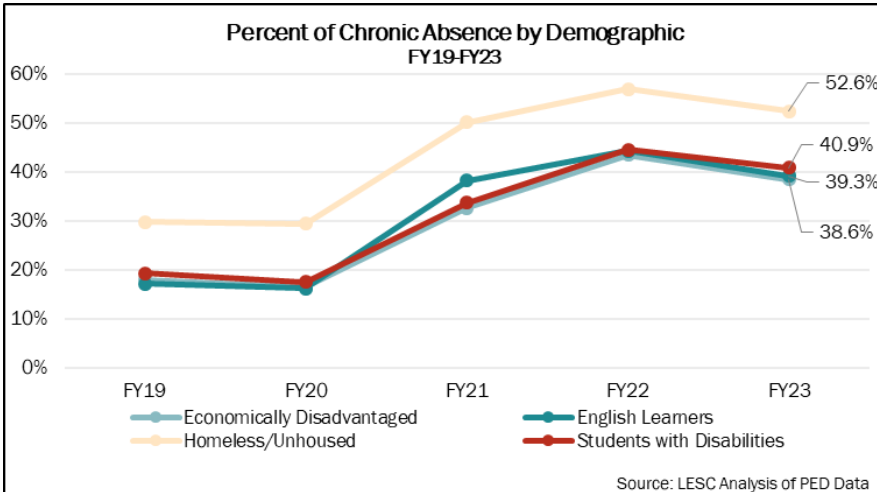
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The Attendance for Success Act, passed in 2019, follows many national best practices and recommendations.

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On a daily basis, missing school not only means losing instruction from teachers—it also means students miss the opportunity to be in the school environment. Schools provide interactions with peers, educators, and adults across the school system, and allow students to grow socially, emotionally, and developmentally, as well as benefit from academic learning in an ongoing and cumulative manner.

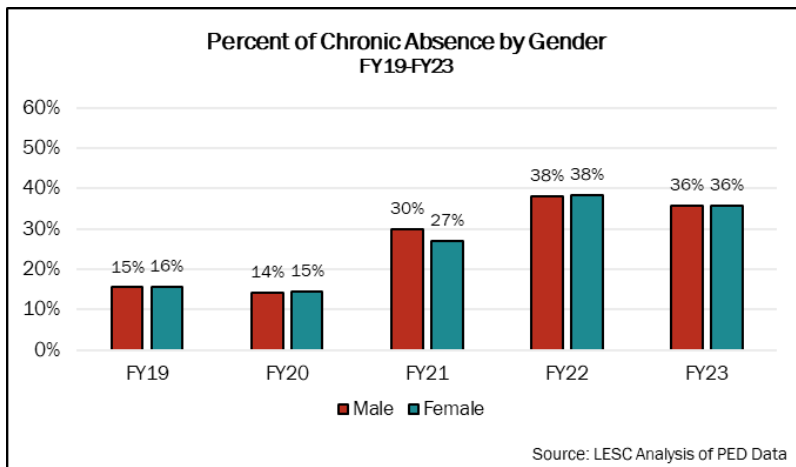


Additional [research](#) from Attendance Works shows chronic absence also affects *all* students, even those in school. When high levels of chronic absence are present in a classroom, all students are impacted because an educator must adjust the content in the classroom to help students who may have missed lessons, resulting in increased “classroom churn,” where students are at differing points in their learning. While educators must always adjust their teaching to meet

students’ diverse learning needs, high levels of chronic absence add another layer of complexity in doing so.

### What It Means

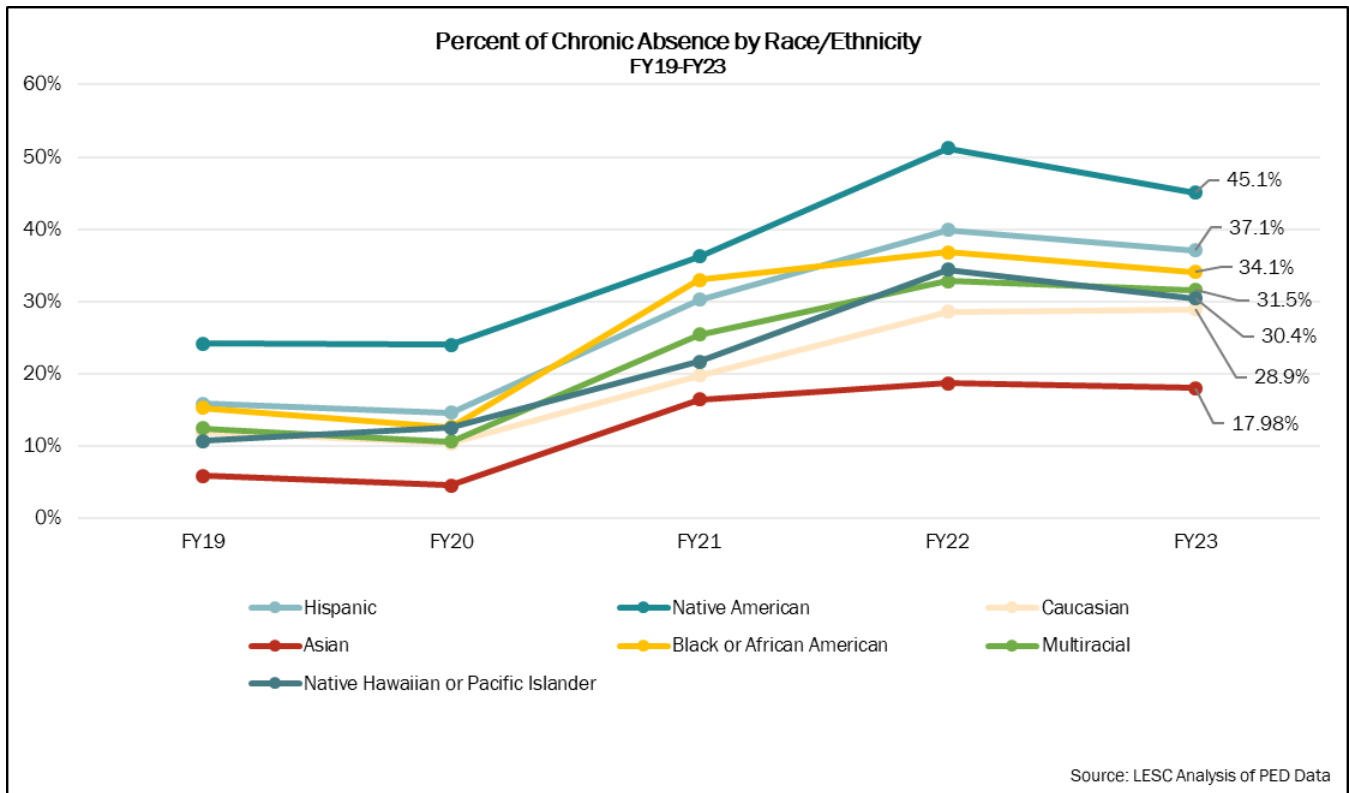
Rates of chronic absenteeism can be difficult to compare nationally because of inconsistencies in how data is collected and reported. Despite these challenges, Attendance Works [reported](#) that prior to the pandemic, one out of every six children nationwide was chronically absent—a figure that soared to closer to one out of three during the pandemic. This was consistent in New Mexico, which saw its chronic absenteeism rate soar during the 2021-2022 school year. PED analysis finds an alarming 40 percent chronic absenteeism rate.



LESC staff analysis, which analyzed student-level data of overall days enrolled and days present for each student, found a still significant 38 percent absenteeism rate. Initial 120-day data analysis by LESAC staff shows a chronic absenteeism rate of 35.3 percent for the 2022-2023 school year, meaning one in three students in New Mexico are absent more than three weeks of school.

During the 2023 legislative session, the Legislature enacted Chapter 19 (House Bill

130), which increased instructional hour requirements for both primary- and secondary-level students to 1,140. Increasing instructional hours to 1,140—up from 990 hours for elementary school and 1,080 hours for secondary school—means instructional hours increased by 150 hours for elementary school students and 60 hours for secondary school students. However, current levels of chronic absence have the potential to negate instructional hour increases—missing 10 percent or more of school could mean missing 114 hours of learning at 1,140 instructional hour minimums.



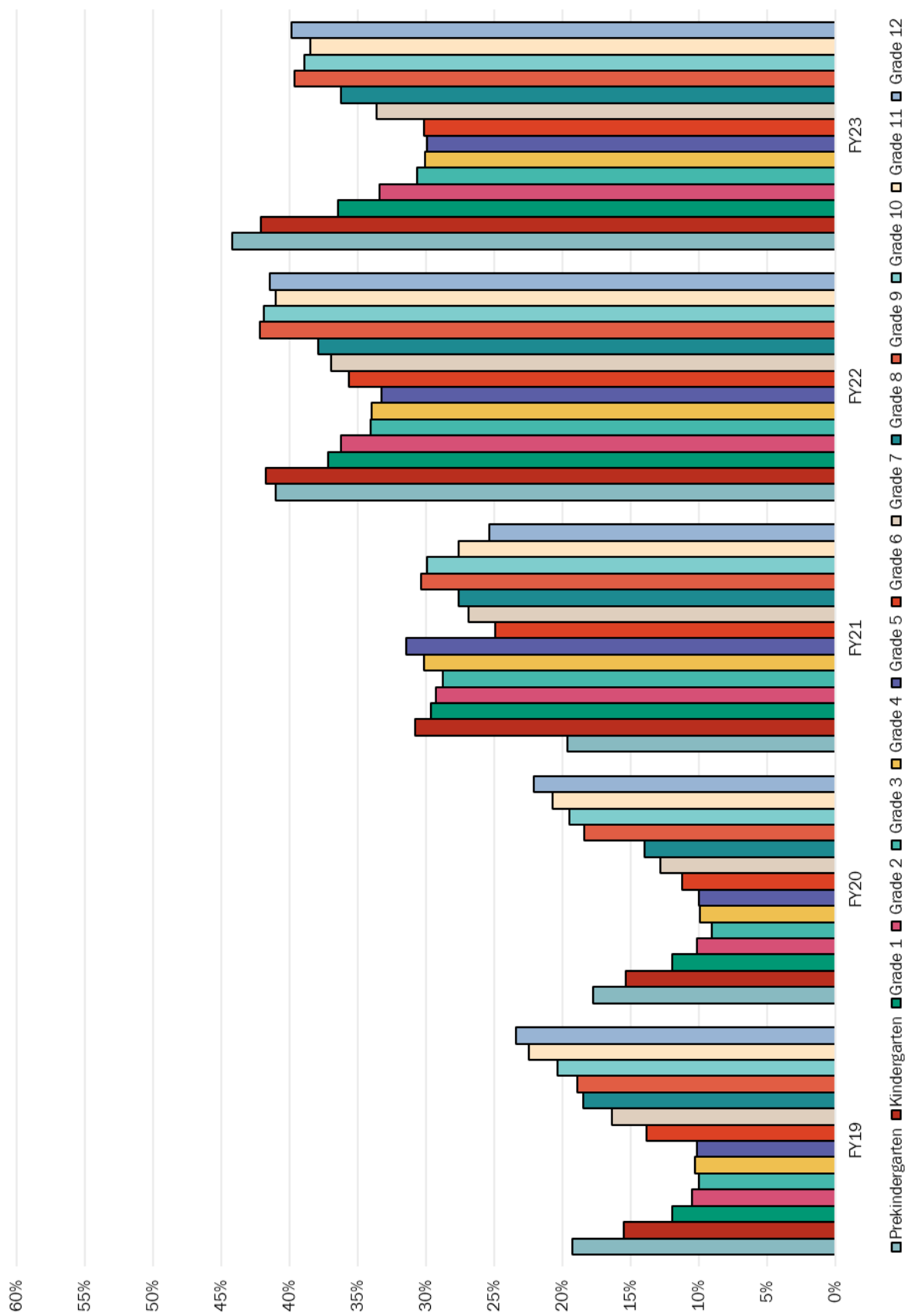
### Pandemic Impacts

During the Covid-19 pandemic, states and school districts nationwide began to experience higher student absenteeism rates. A [2021 report from FutureEd](#), an independent think tank at Georgetown University’s McCourt School of Public Policy, found the pandemic “greatly intensified an absenteeism problem that was already pervasive prior to the pandemic.”

FutureEd’s report also summarized [research](#) from EveryDay Labs, a company focused on improving student attendance. EveryDay Labs reported that during the pandemic, absenteeism, which is typically highest at the high school level, began to spike for younger children. This research also showed children living in poverty, English learners, and students with disabilities particularly struggled to attend school regularly during the pandemic.

Data from New Mexico shows similar disparities with unhoused students showing some of the highest chronic absence rates (52.6 percent) in FY23. Rates were also particularly high in FY23 for students with disabilities (40.9 percent), English learners (39.3 percent), and economically disadvantaged students (38.6 percent).

### Chronic Absenteeism by Grade FY19-FY23



Source: LESC Analysis of PED Data

# Attendance for Success Act

## Overview and History

In 2019, the Legislature passed, and the governor signed, the Attendance for Success Act. This act (Section 22-12A-1 NMSA 1978 through Section 22-12A-14 NMSA 1978) repealed the Compulsory School Attendance law and replaced it with the Attendance for Success Act. This act, which is current state law for attendance, has five primary goals:

1. Preventing school absences;
2. Providing early and intensive interventions for absent, chronically absent, and excessively absent students;
3. Requiring public schools to develop and implement a whole-school absence prevention strategy that is reported to PED and create attendance improvement plans if chronic absence reaches a certain threshold;
4. Creating processes for prevention, intervention, support, and referrals for students and families struggling with school absenteeism; and
5. Creating data and reporting requirements related to attendance.

Notably, the Attendance for Success Act defined chronic absenteeism as a student missing 10 percent or more of classes or school days for any reason; with the exception of school-sponsored events. This was a substantial shift from previous law, which previously defined “habitual truancy” and counted only unexcused absences.

## Levels of Chronic Absence

Under the Attendance for Success Act, a tiered data-informed system is required, with each describing various levels of missing school. Chronic absence includes students in both tier three and tier four.

- **Tier 1:** "Whole school prevention" means universal, whole-school prevention strategies for all students, including students who have missed less than 5 percent of classes or school days for any reason;
- **Tier 2:** "Individualized prevention" means targeted prevention strategies for individual students who are missing 5 percent or more but less than 10 percent of classes or school days for any reason;
- **Tier 3:** "Early intervention" means interventions for students who are missing 10 percent or more but less than 20 percent of classes or school days for any reason; and
- **Tier 4:** "Intensive support" means interventions for students who are missing 20 percent or more of classes or school days for any reason.

New Mexico state law defines chronic absenteeism as missing 10 percent or more of school days each academic year. This definition is consistent with national recommendations about how to define chronic absence.

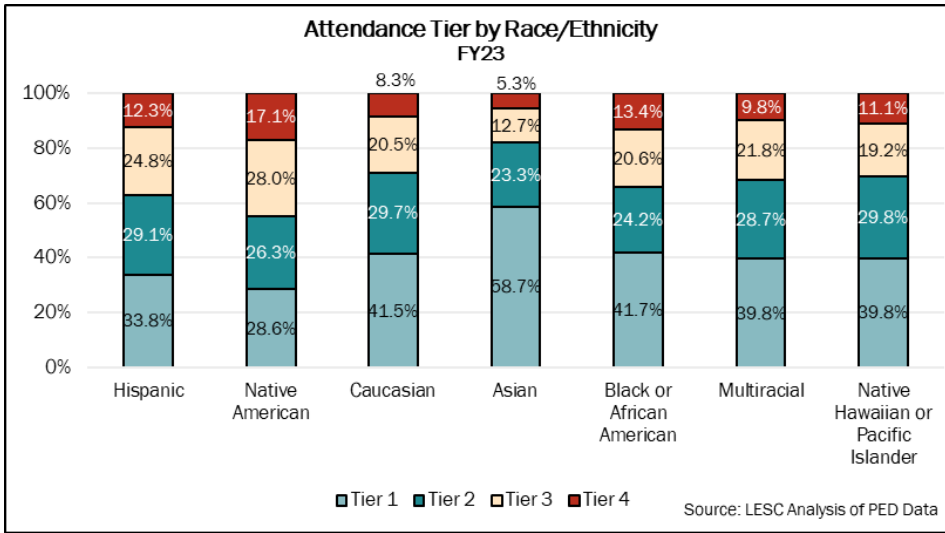
### How is Absence Defined?

The Attendance for Success Act defines a number of crucial terms to describe attendance:

**Absent** means “not in attendance for a class or school day for any reason, whether excused or not; provided that “absent” does not apply to participation in interscholastic extracurricular activities.”

**Chronically absent or chronic absenteeism** means “that a student has been absent for ten percent or more of classes or school days for any reason, whether excused or not, when enrolled for more than ten days.”

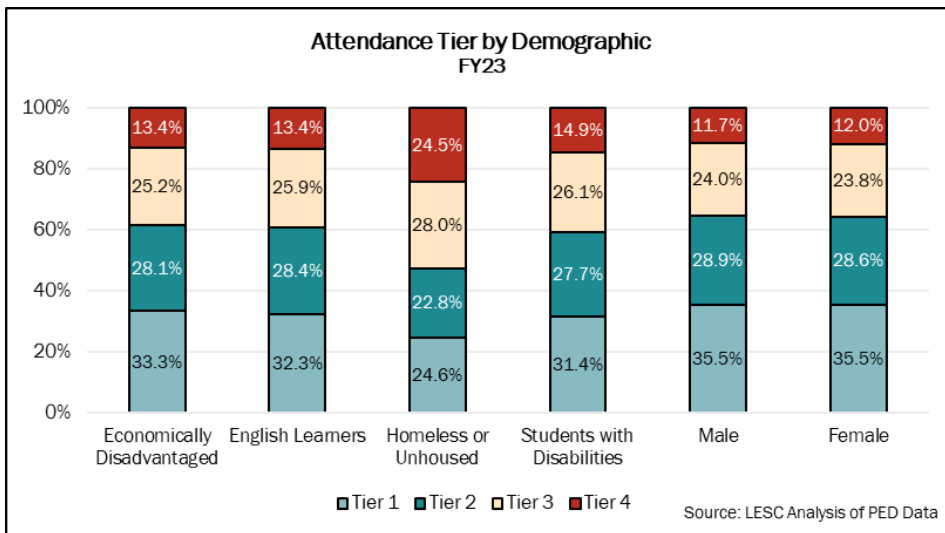
**Excessively absent or excessive absenteeism** means “a student who is identified as needing intensive support and has not responded to intervention efforts implemented by the public school.”



## Attendance for Success Act Interventions

Interventions for students under the Attendance for Success Act are progressive. Interventions begin with meetings with parents and progress to potential referrals to the Children, Youth and Families Department (CYFD).

The law provides for early, intensive, and progressive interventions for chronically absent students. The act directs schools to intervene primarily by building community partnerships between schools and local service providers, businesses, healthcare providers, counselors, and civic groups.



## Attendance for Success Act Reporting Requirements

Current law requires all public schools to report specific attendance metrics to PED. Schools are required to implement evidence-based

early warning systems to identify students who are chronically or excessively absent—or at risk of becoming so—and students who are identified for intervention are required to receive non-punitive consequences. The law also requires schools to document attempts to engage families to address the root causes of chronic absenteeism.