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Attendance and Community Schools

Conversations about kindergarten through 12th grade (K-12) education in New Mexico often revolve around what necessary supports—whether by funding, policy guidance, school district flexibility, or otherwise—are most critical to close the achievement gap for students and increase academic outcomes. Evidence of the concerning gap in achievement and access to a quality education was highlighted in the *Martinez-Yazzie* lawsuit, and the New Mexico Legislature has made significant policy changes and investments in an effort to support the most vulnerable students across the state. However, education can only fulfill the role as the mechanism by which individuals, families, and communities can overcome differences in background when students are in school every day and when education systems have the tools to provide the necessary supports for students to succeed.

Issues surrounding absenteeism and chronic absenteeism in New Mexico are not new concepts to policymakers, but the Covid-19 pandemic has created an unprecedented disruption in attendance and limited student access to the many supports schools provide beyond educational material. Experts are seeing the effects of chronic absenteeism translate into widening achievement gaps across all student demographic groups, but particularly for students from marginalized backgrounds. The Hunt Institute, a nonprofit focused on education policy and research, reports the negative consequences of chronic absenteeism post-pandemic have disproportionately affected students of color, English language learners, students with disabilities, and students from low-income communities.

As state policymakers and education leaders consider ways to intervene in growing absentee rates, it is critical to thoughtfully consider how to support an education ecosystem that can respond to the unique circumstances and needs of every student. Attendance Works, a national group dedicated to advancing student success by reducing chronic absence, emphasizes that reducing chronic absenteeism takes an entire community, and supports the idea that community schools could have a special role to play in getting students back in school, and ensuring those environments support their needs. While it is critical to emphasize that community schools are not *the* solution to absenteeism, a holistic view of the culture of these schools and the tools they utilize can help identify the environments that most successfully support students, reduce absenteeism, and close achievement gaps.

Key Takeaways

One study found that only 17 percent of students who were chronically absent in both kindergarten and first grade were reading proficiently by third grade, compared with 64 percent of those with good attendance.

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Chronic absenteeism in New Mexico in 2018-2019 was 17.87 percent. In 2020-2021, that number rose to 29.66 percent, and in 2021-2022 the number increased again to 40.40 percent. Some New Mexico school districts saw chronic absence rates as high as 66.02 percent.

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Because of their culturally relevant approach and focus on community supports, community schools have seen success in addressing chronic absenteeism and at better rates than traditional public school models.

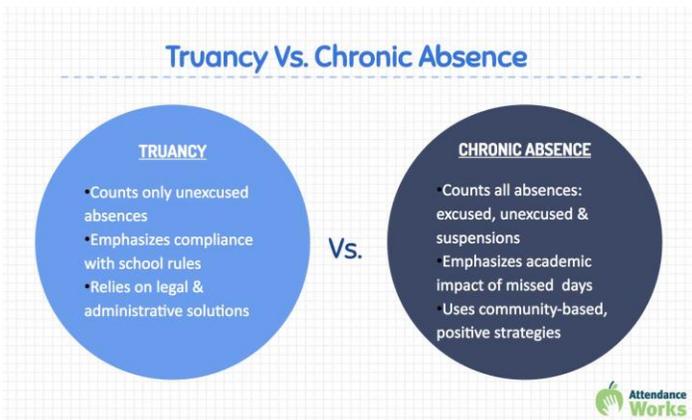
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Chronic Absenteeism and Learning Outcomes

The Evolution from Tracking Truancy to Chronic Absence

In recent years, schools across the country and in New Mexico have shifted from focusing on truancy rates and using punitive actions against students and families to creating incentives and supports to get students in the classroom. As outcomes from these methods became measurable, coupled with national education policy initiatives, policymakers have

moved from traditional truancy policies to creating systems that can track and respond to chronic absenteeism.



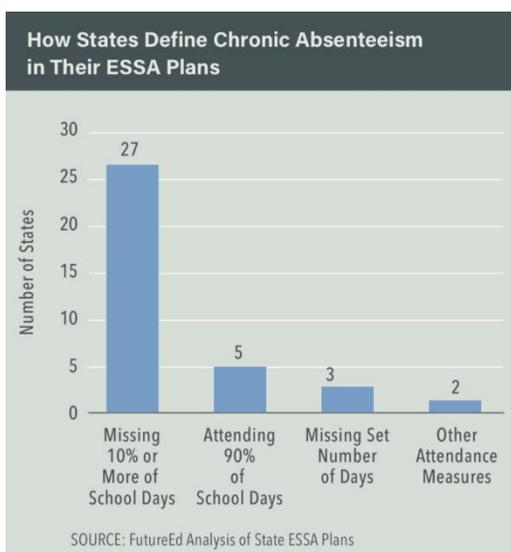
Source: Attendance Works

Every Student Succeeds Act of 2015 (ESSA). In 2013-2014, the Civil Rights Data Collection began tracking chronic absence, defined as missing 15 or more days of school. Shortly after, the federal Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) passed in December 2015, replacing the No Child Left Behind Act, and the U.S. Department of Education formally acknowledged chronic absenteeism as a hidden educational crisis.

ESSA requires states to report on various performance measures, known as indicators. States are required to measure student academic achievement, student growth, progress of English language proficiency, graduation rates, and an indicator of school quality and student success (SQSS). States have significant flexibility in the SQSS measure, and ESSA suggests potential measures, including chronic absenteeism. According to a 2021 report by the Education Commission of the States, a national nonprofit focused on education policy and research, 36 states and D.C. include chronic absenteeism, or some measure of student and/or teacher attendance, in their SQSS.

Chronic Absenteeism and Student Achievement

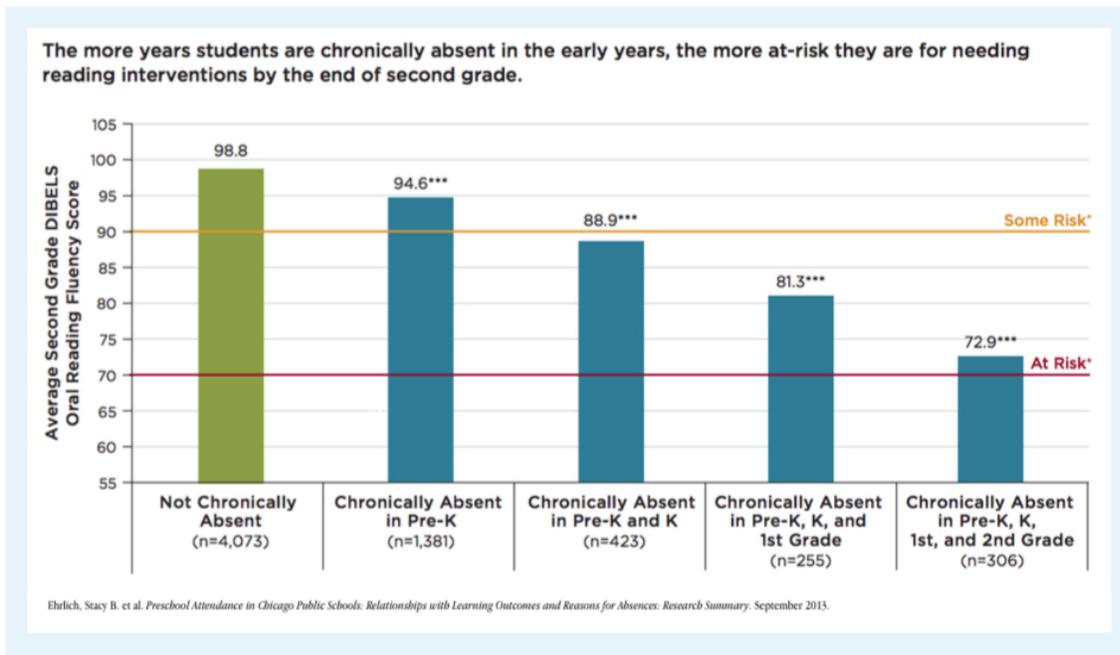
In New Mexico, "chronically absent" or "chronic absenteeism" means that a student has been absent for 10 percent or more of classes or school days for any reason, whether excused or not. The majority of states mirror this definition, although some differences still exist across state policies. Regardless of terminology, with nearly a decade of data, research, and policy evaluation, trends are emerging as to the negative impact chronic absenteeism has on student achievement, what causes students to be absent, and some potential remedies.



Source: FutureEd

K-3 Student Outcomes and Chronic Absenteeism. Chronic absenteeism is being seen across all ages and grade levels, and data continues to support that a child being at school is imperative to their success at any age. Attendance Works, a national nonprofit focused on reducing chronic absenteeism, emphasizes that early absences correlate with reading difficulties and poor attendance patterns in later years.

One California study found that only 17 percent of students who were chronically absent in both kindergarten and first grade were reading proficiently in third grade, compared with 64 percent of those with “good” attendance. Another study from Chicago Public Schools found the more that K-2 students are chronically absent, the higher their risk is for requiring reading interventions.



Source: Chicago Public Schools

Middle School and High School Chronic Absenteeism. Chronic absenteeism rates grow between elementary school and middle school, and typically reach their highest rate in high school. The U.S. Department of Education cites a study of public school students in Utah that found an incidence of chronic absenteeism in even a single year between grade eight and grade 12 was associated with a seven-fold increase in the likelihood of dropping out. As of 2021, data shows that half of all high schools in the U.S. have either extreme or high rates of chronic absenteeism. In nearly a third of high schools, at least 30 percent of students are essentially missing a month or more of school.

These absences translate into both academic and personal consequences for students. Chronically absent students are at a greater academic risk for missing early learning milestones, failing courses, and not graduating on time. Chronically absent students are also at a greater risk for a number of negative long-term consequences, such as being more likely to experience poverty, diminished mental and physical health, and involvement in the criminal justice system as an adult.

Disparities in Demographics in Chronically Absent Students. Poor attendance appears to be particularly pronounced among low-income children, who research shows need more time in the classroom to master reading and who are less likely to have access to resources outside of school to help them catch up. Pre-pandemic data showed that low-income children were four times more likely to be chronically absent than their peers, and initial review of the most recent data from New Mexico mirrors a higher percentage of low-income students are missing school.

Why Are Students Chronically Absent? Attendance Works found students typically miss school for reasons related to four broad categories—myths, barriers, aversion, and disengagement. Research continues to show students face unique challenges to regular school attendance, and to meaningfully address chronic absenteeism, school districts must have the expertise, dedicated staff, flexibility, and resources to respond to individual circumstances.

Myths	Barriers	Aversion	Disengagement
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Absences are only a problem if they are unexcused Don't realize just missing 2 days per month can affect learning Attendance only matters in the older grades 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lack of access to health or dental care Poor Transportation Trauma No safe path to school Homelessness 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Child struggling academically or socially Bullying Ineffective school discipline Parents had negative school experience Undiagnosed disability 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Lack of engaging and relevant instruction No meaningful relationships with adults in school Vulnerable to being with peers out of school vs. in school Poor school climate

Source: Attendance Works



Source: LESC Analysis of The Hunt Institute Research

Strategies to Address Chronic Absenteeism

There is no one-size-fits-all solution to decreasing chronic absenteeism, but broad policy considerations have emerged that can shape how we think about solutions and provide scope to policymakers considering methods to support students participating in school. The Hunt Institute outlines six initiatives with proven success for understanding and addressing chronic absenteeism in school districts.

In addition to these six recommendations, many schools are grappling with how to handle chronic absenteeism in addition to the growing responsibilities placed on teachers and school administrators, whether in regard to performance, reporting requirements, or otherwise. Early research indicates having

dedicated staff tracking absenteeism and building relationships with families is most effective for providing meaningful resources and closing attendance disparities, but many districts do not currently have these positions.

Chronic Absenteeism in New Mexico

New Mexico Policies on Tracking and Addressing Chronic Absenteeism

Following national trends towards chronic absenteeism over truancy-based policies, New Mexico adopted policy shifts in recent years that have driven the collection of chronic

absentee rates, and requires district-specific reporting and planning to address absenteeism. During the 2019 legislative session, two pieces of legislation were chaptered that brought significant changes to tracking attendance and emphasizing its importance in student achievement.

School Support and Accountability Act

Beginning in 2012, the New Mexico Public Education Department (PED) used the A-B-C-D-F Schools Rating Act to measure student achievement and align with national requirements emphasizing teacher evaluations. These report cards provided a summary of student demographics, test scores, teacher evaluations, and other indicators, but some critics argued that these report cards did not tell teachers and districts *how* to improve, and the reporting system failed to accommodate the variables that impact student outcomes beyond teacher performance, such as demographics and attendance.

In 2019, the School Support and Accountability Act replaced the A-B-C-D-F report cards both to bring state reporting into compliance with ESSA, as well as to capture a more holistic data picture to indicate the overall health of students and responsiveness of districts.

Attendance for Success Act (AFSA)

After several attempts to study or update components of the existing attendance law, the Compulsory School Attendance Law (CSAL), lawmakers repealed CSAL in 2019 and replaced it with the Attendance for Success Act (AFSA). Beyond prescribing data collection and use, the AFSA was created to prevent absences, provide earlier interventions for students missing school, and create a process for prevention and support. The Act further established requirements for attendance teams and attendance improvement plans.

- Attendance Team: A group of school-based administrators, staff and community members who collaborate to implement the Attendance Improvement Plan.
- Attendance Improvement Plan: A four-tiered, data-informed system for schools and districts to identify chronically or excessively absent students to develop whole-school prevention and interventions.

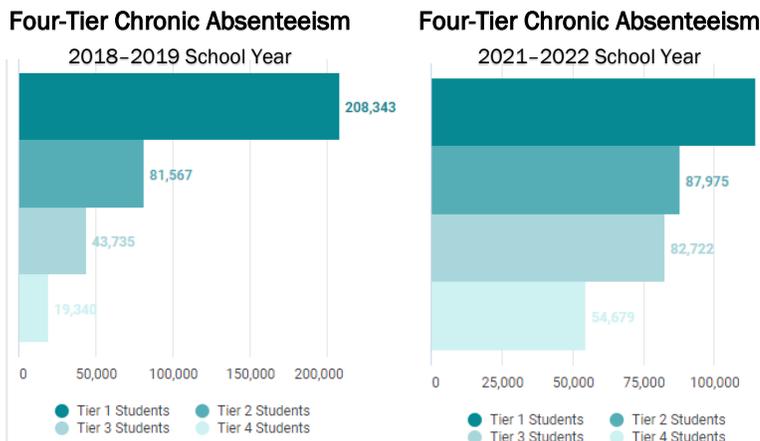
The AFSA and PED established a Four-Tier Intervention Protocol designed to capture how many students are missing school, the rate at which they miss school, and to provide guidelines to districts on what intervention must include within each tier.

The Current State of Absenteeism

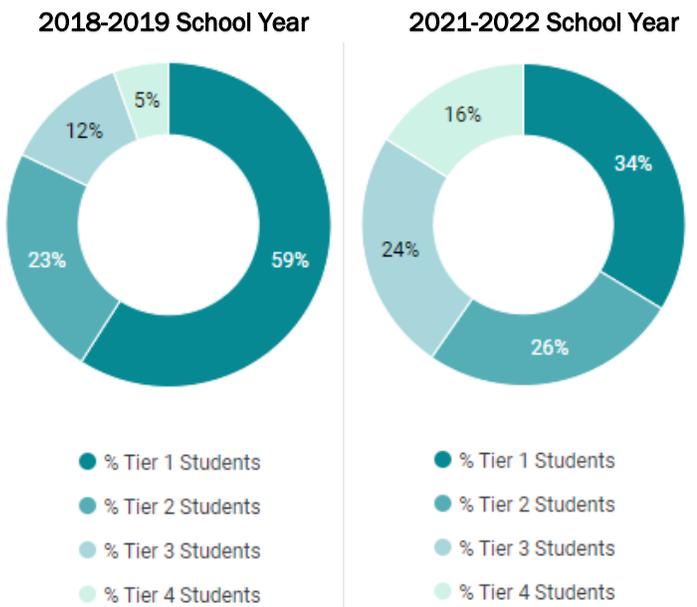
Prior to the pandemic, the average chronic absence rate in New Mexico in the 2018-2019 school year according to PED was 17.87 percent. In 2020-2021, that number rose to 29.66 percent, and in 2021-2022 the number increased again to 40.4 percent. While the average is an alarming increase for education leaders, some New Mexico school districts saw chronic absence rates as high as 66.02 percent, leaving many school districts concerned about how to effectively address chronic absenteeism among their students.

Growing Chronic Absenteeism. New Mexico utilizes a four-tiered system when counting student absences and determining the appropriate measures to intervene. Comparing

measurements of these tiers from 2018-2019 and 2021-2022 demonstrates the growing chronic absenteeism rates. In addition to an overall increase in chronic absenteeism, data also shows a significant increase in Tier 4 students. These students require intensive support from schools that may or may not be equipped with the appropriate staff and resources to focus on attendance issues and solutions.



Source: PED



Source: PED

Definitions of Four-Tiers

- **Tier-1:** Students who have missed less than 5 percent of classes.
- **Tier-2:** Students who are missing 5 percent or more but less than 10 percent of classes or school days.
- **Tier-3:** Students who are considered chronically absent and missing 10 percent or more but less than 20 percent of classes or school days.
- **Tier-4:** Students who are considered excessively absent and missing 20 percent or more of classes or school days.

Attendance Policy Reporting Requirements.

Attendance Improvement Plans (AIPs) are designed to specify school district supports at each tier level, identify attendance improvement targets for

schools with subpopulations with chronic absence rates of 10 percent or greater, and identify an attendance improvement target for districts with chronic absence rates of 10 percent or greater. During the 2022 interim, LESC members heard several superintendents and districts testify that the burden to address absenteeism falls on their shoulders but they lack the teeth to enforce attendance policies and require families ensure students make it to school.

The Connection between Community Schools and Absenteeism

Attendance Works and similar groups have promoted ways to create a conducive learning environment that not only addresses absenteeism, but also positively affects student motivation, engagement, achievement, and well-being. As shown in Figure 1 from a 2019 Attendance Work’s report about how to utilize chronic absence data to improve conditions for learning, Attendance Works supports an approach that goes beyond the classroom. Attendance Works emphasizes that families play an important part in children’s learning and act as their most important advocates across school settings, while community agencies and leaders can provide safe environments and necessary supports.

Nationally, amidst growing chronic absenteeism rates, some education models have seen success in diminishing absentee rates and improving student achievement outcomes.

What are Community Schools?

As defined by the Coalition for Community Schools, an alliance of local, state, and national partners that advocate for community schools, a community school is defined as “a public school—the hub of its neighborhood, uniting families, educators and community partners as an evidence-based strategy to promote equity and educational excellence for each and every child, and an approach that strengthens families and community.”

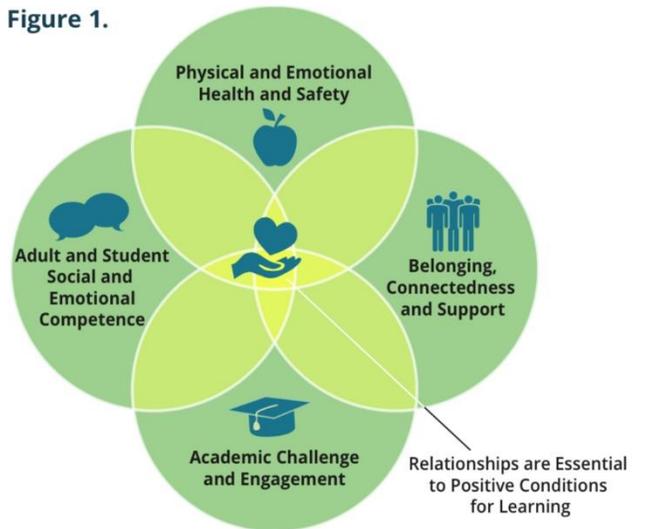
New Mexico Community Schools

For school year 2022-2023, 69 schools received a planning or an implementation community school grant award. According to a report released in March 2021 by PED’s Community Schools and Extended Learning Bureau, New Mexico’s 33 state-funded community schools provided expanded learning time and social and health services with community partners for 11,048 students despite the Covid-19 pandemic. With the growing number of community school grant awards across the state, the number of students served is expected to grow significantly.

Community School Success in Addressing Absenteeism. Several case studies from a variety of states indicate community schools, because of their culturally relevant approach and focus on community supports, have bolstered success in addressing chronic absenteeism and at better rates than traditional public school models. Attendance Works has captured highlights from these case studies that show promising opportunities for New Mexico school districts.

For example, a case study in New York, NY followed the first three years of NYC’s community schools initiative (2016-2018), and found chronic absenteeism was 7.3 percentage points lower in community elementary and middle schools, and 8.3 points lower in high schools. Disciplinary incidents also declined sharply with the performance of students in demographically similar non-community schools.

Figure 1.



Source: Attendance Works

Policy Recommendations

While the Legislature has made unprecedented investments in response to the *Martinez-Yazzie* lawsuit, current data from the 2021-2022 summative assessments confirm student achievement gaps remain wide, with economically disadvantaged students suffering the worst achievement outcomes. Research continues to point to attendance as a key indicator in student success and well-being, and measures to decrease chronic absenteeism should be prioritized especially with current data showing troubling absenteeism rates across school districts.

Research shows community schools are uniquely positioned to address not only chronic absenteeism, but a wide array of needs experienced by students. While legislators should weigh the costs of growing the number of community schools and supporting their sustainability, policymakers should also consider how to replicate the culturally relevant and community-based supports across all New Mexico schools in order to address not only chronic absenteeism, but student achievement as a whole.

Legislators may also want to track and consider what specific, targeted strategies employed by both community and other schools affect positive student outcomes most, to aptly invest in evidence-based actions.