



D.C. POLICY CENTER

Education Policy Initiative

PUBLIC HEARING

Chronic Absenteeism and Truancy

COMMITTEE OF THE WHOLE

November 13th, 2024

Hearing Room 412 (Track B)

John A. Wilson Building

Testimony of Hannah Mason

Senior Education Research Analyst, Education Policy Initiative

D.C. Policy Center

Good afternoon, Chairman Mendelson and members of the Committee of the Whole.

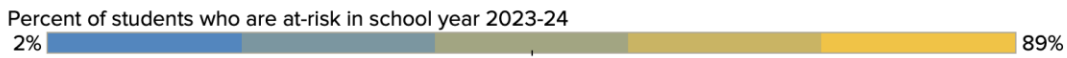
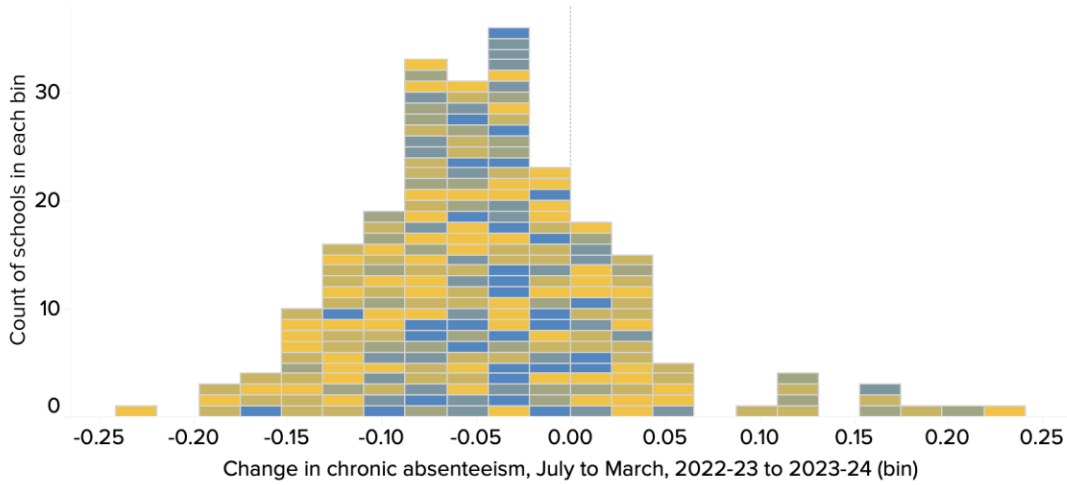
My name is Hannah Mason, and I am the Senior Education Research Analyst of the Education Policy Initiative at the D.C. Policy Center, an independent think tank focused on advancing policies for a growing, vibrant, and compelling District of Columbia.

Today, my testimony will focus on the reduction in chronic absenteeism rates in D.C.'s schools as of March 2024, stakeholders' perceptions of attendance—including new reasons for missing school that include substitute teachers and morning routine disruptions— and school leaders' insights into what has led to attendance improvements at their schools and which strategies have been less effective.

As of March 2024, data show that across all D.C.'s public schools, chronic absenteeism improved by 4.3 percentage points over the same time during the previous year, and a majority of schools improved by at least one percentage point.ⁱ

Chronic truancy, which focuses on unexcused absences only, has improved by 5.2 percentage points, with economically disadvantaged students seeing the biggest drop in chronic truancy at 6.6 percentage points.ⁱⁱ This is encouraging for pandemic recovery because more students are attending school consistently, which means more students are accessing the support needed to address learning loss, but it is not enough to return to pre-pandemic levels.

Change in chronic absenteeism in D.C.'s public schools as of March over two school years

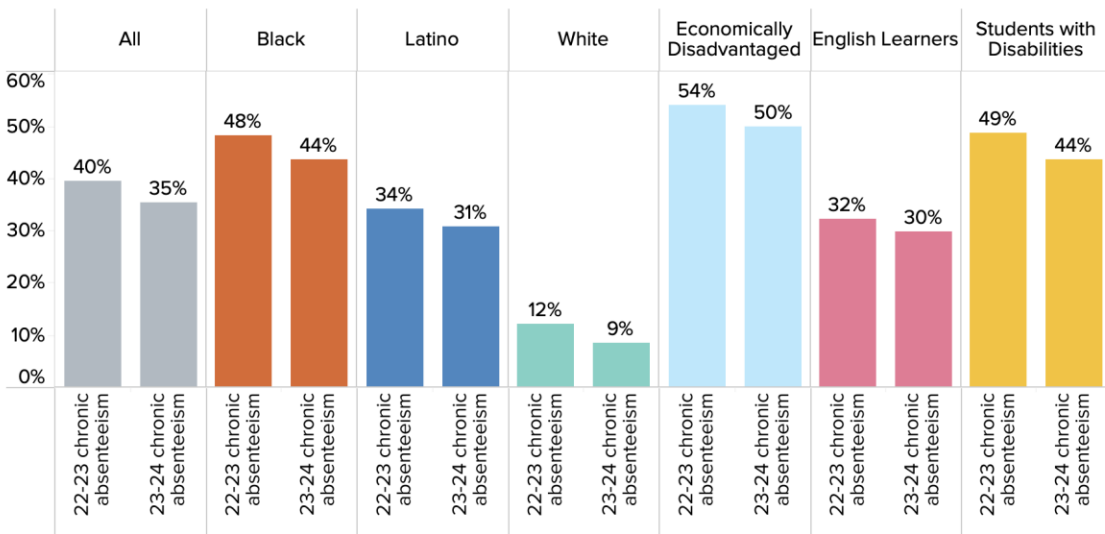


Source: Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE)'s 2023-24 School Year Attendance Reporting.

Note: Percentage point change is calculated by subtracting the chronic absenteeism rate in March 2024 from the rate in March 2023, meaning that a negative value indicates a reduction in chronic absenteeism.



Chronic absenteeism rates by student group, school year 2022-23 and 2023-24 as of March 2024

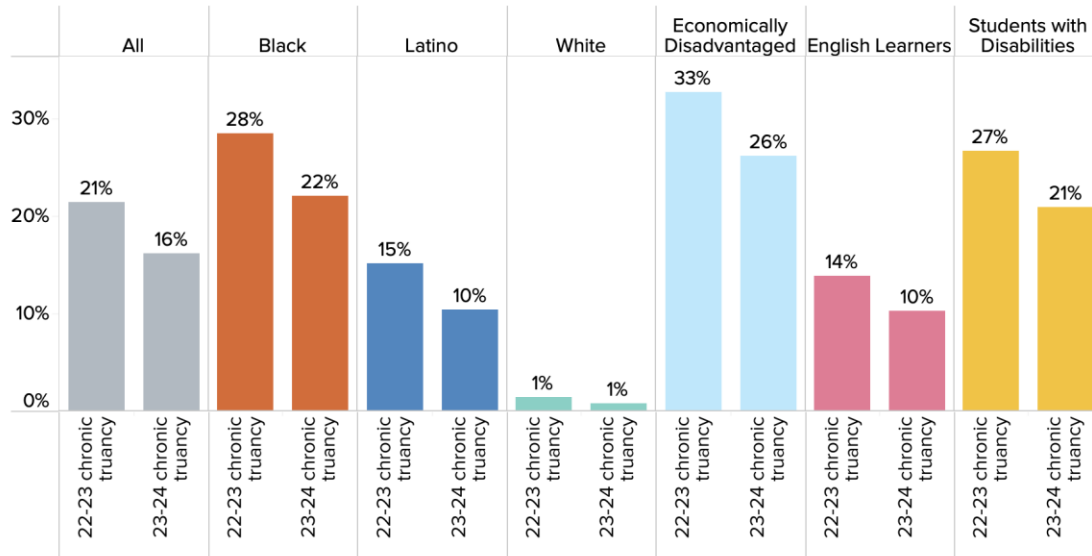


Source: Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE). 2024. "2023-24 Mid-Year Attendance Brief". OSSE. Retrieved from https://osse.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/osse/page_content/attachments/Mid_Year_Attendance_1Pager%206_14_2024.pdf

Note: The 2023-24 attendance and truancy data is as of March 2024.



Chronic truancy rates by student group, school year 2022-23 and 2023-24 as of March 2024



Source: Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE). 2024. "2023-24 Mid-Year Attendance Brief". OSSE. Retrieved from https://osse.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/osse/page_content/attachments/Mid_Year_Attendance_1Pager%206_14_2024.pdf

Note: The 2023-24 attendance and truancy data is as of March 2024.



Insights from D.C. Policy Center listening sessions may help explain why chronic

absenteeism numbers remain higher than pre-pandemic levels. In summer 2024, we

held listening sessions with students, parents/caregivers, and teachers, and asked about

perceptions and attitudes toward attendance. In these listening sessions, some of the same

reasons for absenteeism that came up in other post-pandemic listening sessions were

mentioned, including mental health challenges amid an uptick in violent crime, illness as a

reason due to COVID or otherwise, shorter days, especially leaving school early, in-school

person seeming less necessary especially for older students, the option to make up work

virtually, less perceived accountability, and some parents believing that attendance records

aren't accurate. We also heard some new reasons from multiple groups, including knowing a

substitute teacher would be present and oversleeping or lengthy morning routines.

Speaking with school leaders about attendance is important because they play a critical part in crafting and implementing policies that directly impact attendance.

Interviews with school leaders across all grade levels and sectors who have seen significant decreases in chronic absenteeism—while serving at least the city average of students designated as at-risk—revealed both promising and less effective attendance strategies. Among these leaders, most indicated that increasing student check-ins contributed to attendance improvements, and most noted that fostering adult-student relationships also supported attendance improvements. All school leaders reported that students who missed school more often tended to have lower academic achievement. Punitive measures, such as reports to the D.C. Child and Family Services Agency (CFSA) and the Office of the Attorney General (OAG), were deemed the least helpful strategies, with fewer than half of respondents finding them beneficial. Lastly, transportation was identified as the most persistent barrier to attendance, cited by the majority of respondents.

D.C. is making concerted efforts to reduce chronic absenteeism and truancy.

Reducing absenteeism has been a major goal for government agencies, nonprofits, and other stakeholders in the District. As part of this work, the Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE) signed on to Attendance Works, EdTrust, and Nat Malkus from American Enterprise Institute (AEI)'s nationwide chronic absence challenge to reduce chronic absence by 50% in 5 years.ⁱⁱⁱ Early data shows that absenteeism is decreasing in D.C., which is a positive sign. Continuing to implement promising strategies and learning from schools experiencing attendance growth is critical to ensuring students attend school regularly.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify, and I welcome any questions you have.

ⁱ Coffin, C. 2024. "Chart of the week: Amid widespread reductions in chronic absenteeism, about half of schools saw an improvement in learning outcomes this part year." D.C. Policy Center. Retrieved from <https://www.dcpolicycenter.org/publications/chart-of-the-week-despite-reductions-in-chronic-absenteeism-schools-saw-improved-learning-outcomes/>

ⁱⁱ Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE). 2024. "2023-24 Mid-Year Attendance Brief". OSSE. Retrieved from https://osse.dc.gov/sites/default/files/dc/sites/osse/page_content/attachments/Mid_Year_Attendance_1Pager%206_14_2024.pdf

ⁱⁱⁱ Attendance Works. "States participating in the 50% challenge." Attendance Works. Retrieved from <https://www.attendanceworks.org/states-participating-in-the-50-challenge/>