Patterns and predictors of **CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM** in D.C.'s middle and high schools

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Chronic absenteeism—defined as missing at least 10 percent of the school year—has become one of the most persistent post-pandemic challenges for D.C.'s public schools. Chronic absenteeism is especially high for secondary school students: In school year 2023-24, over half of D.C.'s public high school students (56 percent) were chronically absent, compared to 40 percent of students across all grade levels. This pattern mirrors national trends, where chronic absenteeism has remained elevated despite recent declines.

Drawing on student-level records from the Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE) across four school years—two before the pandemic (2017–18, 2018–19) and two after the return to in-person learning (2021–22, 2022–23)—this report has three key findings.

Finding #1

Chronic absenteeism has shifted in who it affects and when it escalates.

- Chronic absenteeism spikes at the transition to high school, with grade 9 emerging as a clear inflection point.
- This pattern has been amplified by the rapid increase in chronic absenteeism at the end of middle school. Students in grade 8 experienced the largest increase post-pandemic in chronic absenteeism (21 percentage points) among all grades.
- Female students are now more likely to be chronically absent compared to male students, reversing a pre-pandemic pattern.
- Black and economically disadvantaged students experienced the largest increase in chronic absenteeism.
- A larger share of chronically absent students are meeting or exceeding expectations on the statewide assessment, despite missing school.
- Before the pandemic, a school's overall chronic absenteeism rate was associated with individual behavior. Post-pandemic, this peer effect is far less pronounced in high schools, leaving attendance more a matter of individual or family circumstance than shared norms.

Finding #2

Chronic absenteeism is persistent and sticky.

- Once students fall into chronic absenteeism, they tend to stay there. Among those who were chronically absent in school year 2021-22, 82 percent were also chronically absent in school year 2022-23. This means that students who miss a lot of school in one year are likely to do so in the following year, resulting in a lot of cumulative missed school.
- Students just above the chronic absenteeism threshold (missing just 10-19.99 percent of the school year) and economically disadvantaged students were most likely to improve their attendance year to year, suggesting that targeted outreach can make a difference.
- Economically disadvantaged students were also more likely to improve their attendance from one year to the next.

Finding #3

The strongest predictors of chronic absenteeism are consistent, but their weights have changed.

- Economic disadvantage, repeating grade 9, and prior-year chronic absenteeism are the most powerful predictors of future absenteeism.
- Achievement matters: students scoring below expectations on the grade 8 statewide assessment are more likely to become chronically absent in grade 9.
- Attending a DCPS school (rather than a public charter) is also associated with higher absenteeism.

Policy implications

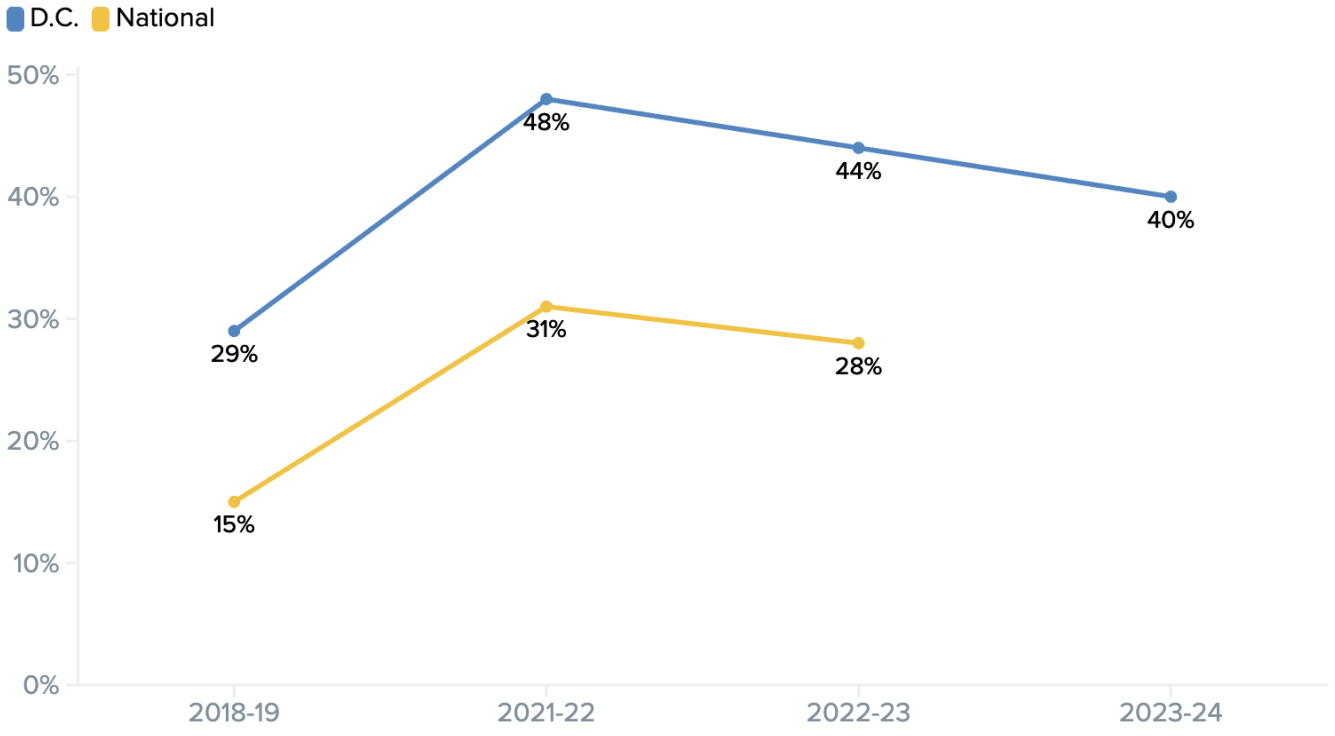
The District has an ambitious goal of reducing chronic absenteeism to 24 percent by school year 2027-28. This analysis provides some policy recommendations that can support this goal:

- Intervene early, concentrating on middle school (grades 6 through 8), as many students are likely to continue being chronically absent from grade 8 to grade 9.
- Provide intensive support for students in grade 9, with additional focus on grade 9 repeaters.
- Prioritize outreach to students with moderate chronic absenteeism. With the right interventions such as building stronger student-teacher relationships and developing relevant curriculum, they are the most likely to move out of chronic absenteeism status.
- Study and scale charter school practices that are associated with lower absenteeism.
- Monitor the emerging gender gap that disfavors female students, as well as the persistence of structural barriers for economically disadvantaged students.

INTRODUCTION

Chronic absenteeism remains elevated in D.C. and across the nation.

Figure 1. Chronic absenteeism, pre -and post-pandemic in D.C. and nationally



Source: Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE) report card data and Ed Data Express.
Note: 2023-24 is not on the chart because national data are not available at this time.

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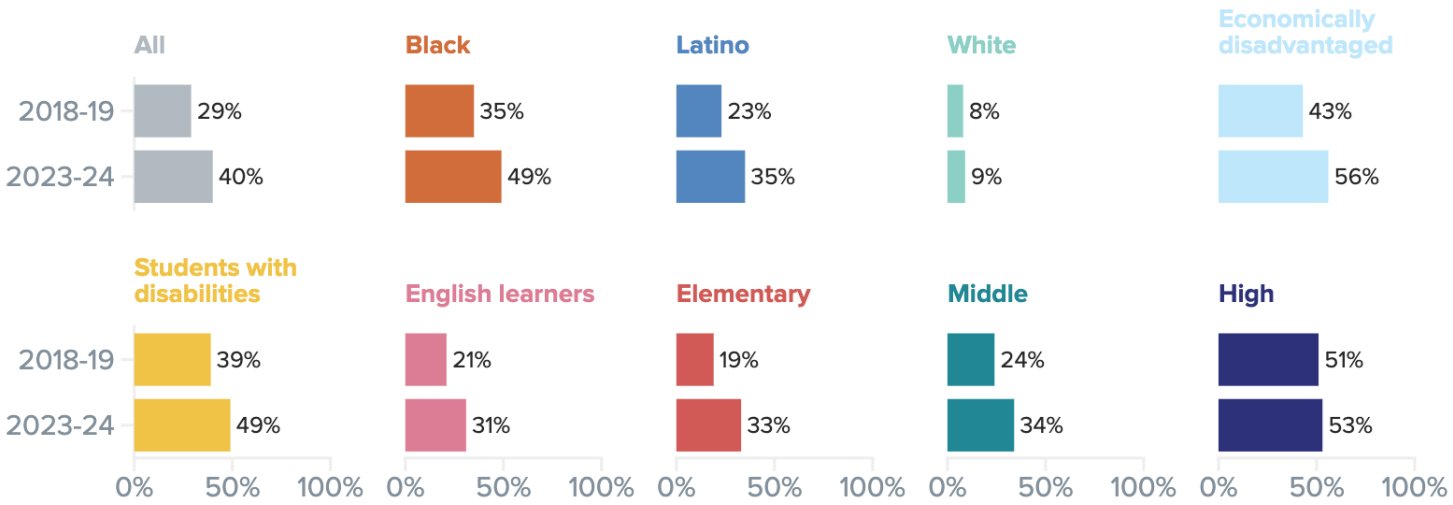
Chronic absenteeism—defined as missing at least 10 percent of the school year (in D.C., at least 18 of the required 180 instructional days)—remains one of the most persistent pandemic-driven challenges across school districts nationwide. In school year 2021-22 (the first full year of in-person learning post-pandemic), 31 percent of public-school students nationwide were chronically absent[1]—double the rate from school year 2018-19.[2] The national rate declined by 3 percentage points in school year 2022-23 but remained above pre-pandemic levels. Chronic absenteeism increased across nearly all student groups post-pandemic. It remains especially high among Black and Latino students, students with disabilities, high school students, and students in urban districts.[3]

In D.C., trends closely mirror the national picture. In school year 2023-24, 40 percent of public school students (including DCPS and charters) were chronically absent—down from a high of 48 percent in 2021-22 but significantly above pre-pandemic levels. Chronic absenteeism rates are higher than pre-pandemic levels across all major student subgroups. It was higher than average in school year 2023-24 for Black students, economically disadvantaged students, students with disabilities, and high school students.

For regional context, chronic absenteeism in Baltimore City reached 49 percent in school year 2023-24. However, attendance policies vary: Maryland requires students to be present for 50 percent of the school day, compared to D.C.'s policy that requires 60 percent, for example.[4] This distinction affects comparability across jurisdictions.

Figure 2. Changes in chronic absenteeism for D.C.'s students by group, pre- and post-pandemic



Source: Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE) school report card data.
Note: As of school year 2022-23, D.C reports outcomes for students who are economically disadvantaged instead of at-risk. The economically disadvantaged designation includes all the same categories as at-risk except for overage in high school.

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Background on chronic absenteeism in D.C.

In D.C.'s public schools, attendance is required starting in kindergarten (age 5 by September 30) through meeting high school graduation requirements (including attaining a GED) or turning 18 years old.[5] Absences can be unexcused or excused if they are included on a list of allowable absences in code or specific to the school, including illness, medical appointments, observance of a religious holiday, and other reasons.[6] The box below outlines how the Office of the State Superintendent (OSSE) measures and reports key attendance definitions and recent policy changes in D.C. in reference to student presence, absence, and truancy. Additionally, OSSE monitors attendance risk tiers to provide a more detailed look at attendance patterns – these risk tiers below categorize students based on the percentage of school they miss and how many instructional days this equates to.

Key definitions:

Chronically Absent: A student who has been absent – both excused and unexcused, including partial and full-day absences – for at least 10 percent of their enrolled instructional days.

Chronically Truant: A student who has accrued at least 10 full-day unexcused absences during the school year.

Requirement to be considered present: A student must be present for at least 60 percent of the instructional day but not the full day to qualify as "partially present", and a student must be present for the entire instructional day to be "fully present".[19]

Context: Changes to attendance policy

Starting in school year 2022-23, D.C. changed the definition of a full day of attendance. Students are now marked present if they attend at least 60 percent of the day, compared to the previous threshold of 80 percent. This policy change affects how absences are recorded and may partially explain recent shifts in reported attendance, to mean students are counted as present more than in previous years (although the size of this impact is unknown).

Definitions of OSSE's chronic absenteeism tiers

Tier	Amount of school missed	Number of Instructional Days missed
Satisfactory attendance tier	Missing less than 5%	0-8 days
At-risk attendance tier	Missing 5- 9.99%	9-17 days
Moderate chronic absence	Missing 10-19.99%	18-35 days
Severe chronic absence	Missing 20-29.99%	36-53 days
Profound chronic absence	Missing 30% or more	54+ days

Excused or unexcused?

Chronic absenteeism includes excused and unexcused absences: In school year 2023–24, 30 percent of students were chronically truant—meaning they had unexcused absences only. This represents a 7-point decline from the previous year and suggests that a growing share of absences are now excused rather than unexcused.

Students miss school for many reasons. Attendance Works categorizes these reasons into four key drivers:[7]

- **Barriers** such as acute illness, unreliable transportation, and unsafe neighborhoods;
- **Aversion** including academic struggles, anxiety, or social difficulties;
- **Disengagement** when students feel bored, disconnected, see little value in school, or feel too far behind; and
- **Misconceptions** such as underestimating how much school they've missed or assuming that occasional absences don't matter.

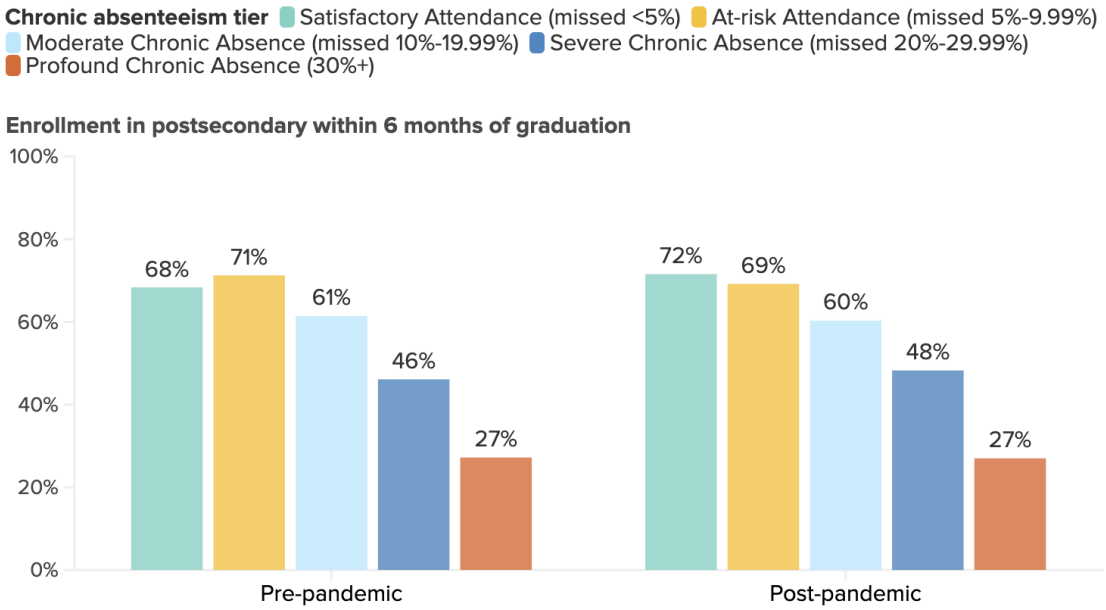
While these categories help explain why students are absent, research has not identified a single dominant cause behind rising absenteeism, making it difficult to design system-level interventions that reliably improve attendance.

Why attendance matters: Academic and behavioral impacts in a post-pandemic context

Chronic absenteeism has long been associated with negative outcomes for students—academically, socially, and emotionally. Research shows that missing school consistently can contribute to below grade-level performance in literacy and numeracy in early grades, lower achievement in middle and high school, higher risk of dropping out, and weaker social-emotional development.[8] In D.C., attending school has been shown to improve learning outcomes: Controlling for student characteristics, there is a small and positive association between in-seat attendance and student growth on the statewide assessment in math and English Language Arts (ELA).[9]

This connection is especially critical now, as students continue to recover from the impacts of the pandemic.[10] In D.C., learning outcomes have increased in English Language Arts (ELA): 38 percent of students met or exceeded expectations. In math, 26 percent of students did so among students in all tested grades (3rd grade through high school). In regard to social and emotional wellbeing, 34 percent of high school students report feeling sad or hopeless—a noticeable increase from prior years.[11]

Figure 3. Postsecondary enrollment and chronic absenteeism tier for all D.C.'s high school graduates



Source: Data requested from the Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE).
Note: Pre-pandemic averages school years 2017-18 and 2018-19, post-pandemic averages school years 2021-22 and 2022-23.

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Consistent attendance is also linked to future outcomes. The data indicate a strong relationship between attendance and postsecondary enrollment, defined as enrollment in a two- or four-year degree program within six months of high school graduation. [12] Among high school graduates:

- On average, **7 in 10** high school graduates with satisfactory attendance (missed less than 5 percent of instructional days) enrolled in college.

Among those with profound chronic absenteeism (missed more than 30 percent of the school year), only 3 in 10 enrolled in college. These gaps are consistent across student groups and hold up in both pre- and post-pandemic periods:

- Before the pandemic, there was a gap of **41 percentage points** in postsecondary enrollment between the highest and lowest chronic absenteeism tiers. This gap increased slightly to 45 percentage points in the post-pandemic period.
- Among at-risk students, **54 percent** of those with satisfactory attendance enrolled in postsecondary, compared to just 23 percent of those with profound chronic absenteeism.

Shifting perceptions after the pandemic

Today's chronic absenteeism trends reflect more than just personal or academic challenges; they reflect broader shifts in how students and families think about school.

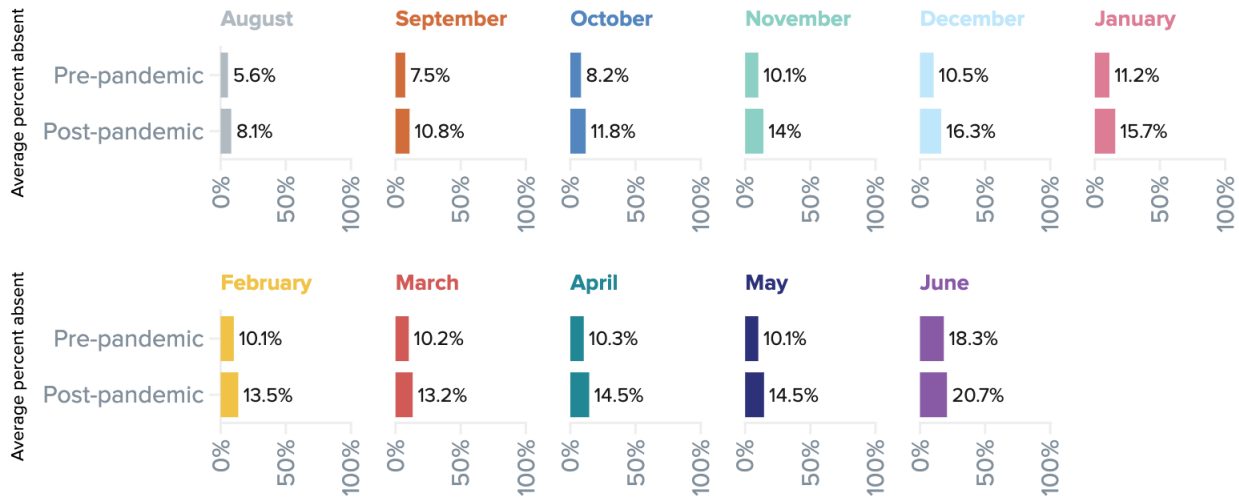
In listening sessions focused on school year 2022-23, D.C.'s parents, students, and teachers identified several emerging drivers of absenteeism.[13] These themes may have shifted in D.C. with more distance from the pandemic, but many still emerge in listening sessions from year to year.

- Illness is now a more frequently cited reason for missing school.
- Students report taking more mental health days.
- Safety concerns, particularly when commuting to school, are more common.
- Many students now arrive late or leave early, and some parents and older students increasingly view in-person attendance as less essential to learning."
- Educators also report a lower sense of the need to attend school, especially for older students.

These themes are supported by attendance data in D.C. December, historically a lower-absence month, has seen the sharpest rise in absenteeism since the pandemic. In school years 2021-22 and 2022-23, an average of 16.3 percent of students were absent in December, compared to 10.5 percent in the same month pre-pandemic.[14] This increase may reflect heightened illness, but also changing norms around travel and attendance during the winter months for some student groups:[15]

- The increase in December absences was significantly larger for white students and English learners than for other months, suggesting that discretionary travel or flexible attendance choices may be contributing factors.
- In contrast, for at-risk students, Black students, and students with disabilities, the rise in December absences was similar to increases seen in other months—indicating that their absenteeism is more consistent throughout the year and likely driven by persistent structural barriers.

Figure 4. Percent of students who are absent by month in D.C., pre- and post-pandemic school years



Source: Monthly in-seat attendance rates requested from the Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE).
Note: Percent absent is calculated as 1- in-seat attendance. Pre-pandemic school years include 2017-18 and 2018-19 and post-pandemic school years include 2021-22 and 2022-23.

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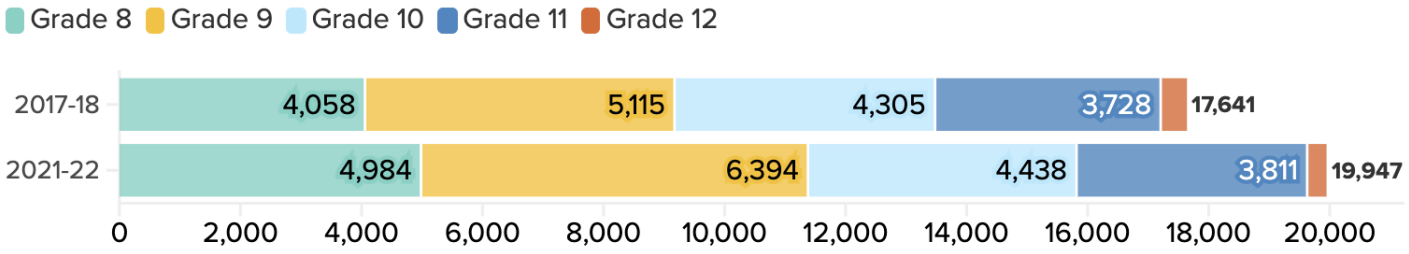
Figure 5. Students in sample for both years of pre- or post-pandemic cohort, by grade in first year



Note: This chart shows the number of unique students who are enrolled in the two consecutive years for their cohort by the grade in the first year of their cohort. The pre-pandemic cohort begins in 2017-18 and continues to 2018-19, and the post-pandemic cohort begins in 2021-22 and continues to 2022-23.
Note: For grade 12, in school year 2017-18, there were 435 students. In school year 2021-22, there were 320 students.

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Understanding chronic absenteeism: Research questions and approach

In D.C., chronic absenteeism affects most high school students. To better understand what is driving these trends, this analysis focuses on high school students and examines how the predictors of chronic absenteeism have changed over time, with the goal of identifying where current interventions may be working and where more targeted efforts are needed.

Five core questions guide this research:

1. How does chronic absenteeism vary by student characteristics in grades 8–12 in the post-pandemic period?
2. Which student characteristics are most associated with chronic absenteeism in the following school year?
3. Which students are most likely to cease being chronically absent from year to year?
4. How do these patterns compare to the pre-pandemic period?
5. What are effective roles schools can play in shaping attendance outcomes?

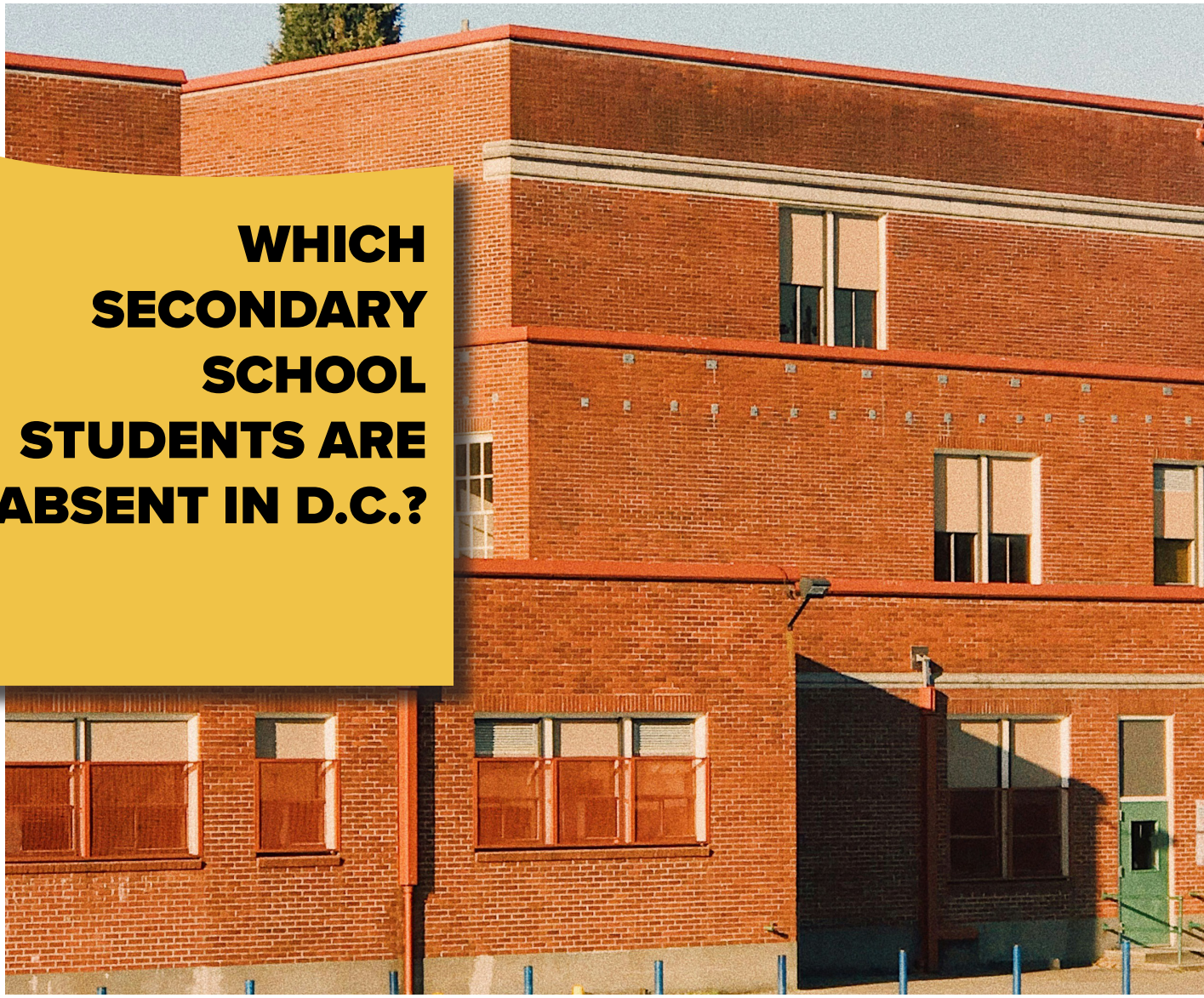
To answer these questions, the D.C. Policy Center analyzed four years of student-level data obtained through a data-sharing agreement with the Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE): two years pre-pandemic (2017-18 and 2018-19) and two years after schools returned to in-person learning (2021-22 and 2022-23). The analysis covers students in grades 8 through 12 and includes only those with consecutive-year enrollment data.

The sample (see Appendix B) allows for a detailed look at how chronic absenteeism varies across grades and student groups—and how those patterns have shifted post-pandemic (see Appendix C). There are 101,988 records in the sample across four years, including 19,361 unique students enrolled for two consecutive years pre-pandemic and 20,660 unique students enrolled for two consecutive years post-pandemic.

The research team used descriptive statistics to assess broad trends and logistic regression models to estimate the likelihood of chronic absenteeism based on student characteristics. These findings are descriptive, not causal, and highlight associations rather than definitive impacts. Additional methodological details are available in Appendix A.

The following sections examine how these trends play out in D.C.'s secondary schools: Who is most likely to be chronically absent? What predicts absenteeism in the following year? And which students are most likely to improve? The answers to these questions can help focus efforts where they are most likely to yield results.

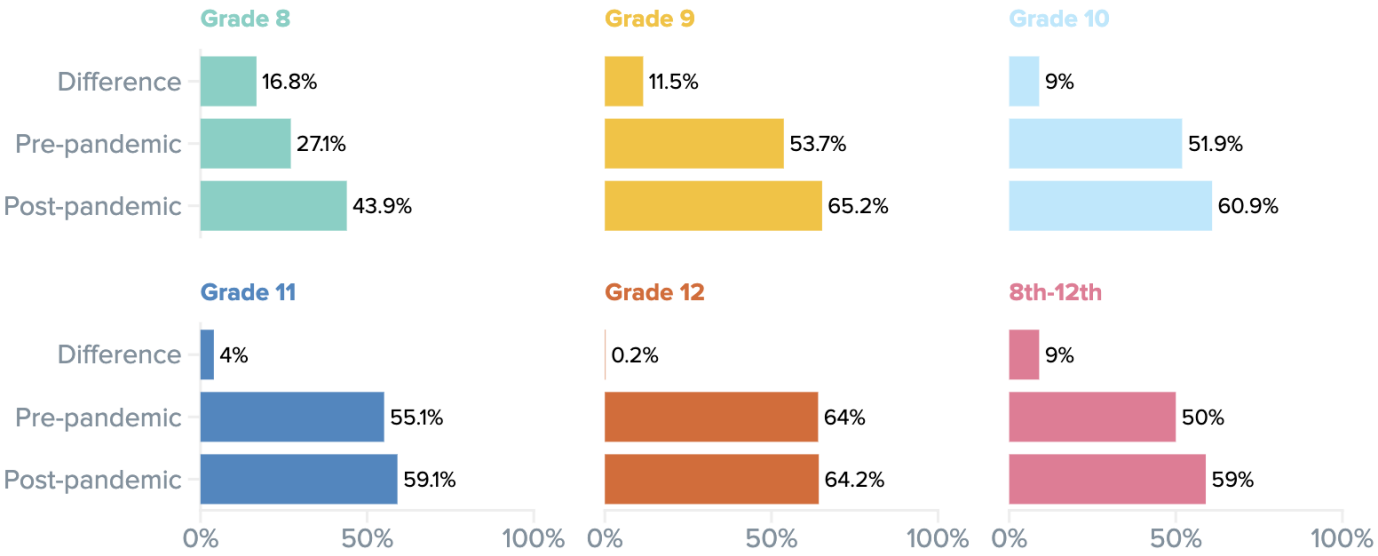
WHICH SECONDARY SCHOOL STUDENTS ARE ABSENT IN D.C.?



This analysis draws on student-level data for D.C.'s public school students in grades 8 through 12 across four school years: two pre-pandemic (2017-18 and 2018-19) and two post-pandemic (2021-22 and 2022-23). Across the full post-pandemic sample, 58.7 percent of students were chronically absent, up 8.6 percentage points from the pre-pandemic sample.

- Chronic absenteeism increases as students move to higher grades, peaking at 64.2 percent among 12th graders in the post-pandemic sample.
- The most significant jump occurs in grade 9: 65.2 percent of students in this grade were chronically absent, up 21.3 percentage points from grade 8. This makes grades 8 and 9 critical years for intervention.
- By contrast, 8th grade saw the largest increase in chronic absenteeism between the two periods, up 16.8 percentage points post-pandemic.
- Chronic absenteeism for 12th graders was similar in both periods.

Figure 6. Chronic absenteeism by grade in sample, pre - and post-pandemic



Source: Data provided by the Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE) on postsecondary enrollment and chronic absenteeism.
Note:
Pre-pandemic averages school years 2017-18 and 2018-19, post-pandemic averages school years 2021-22 and 2022-23.

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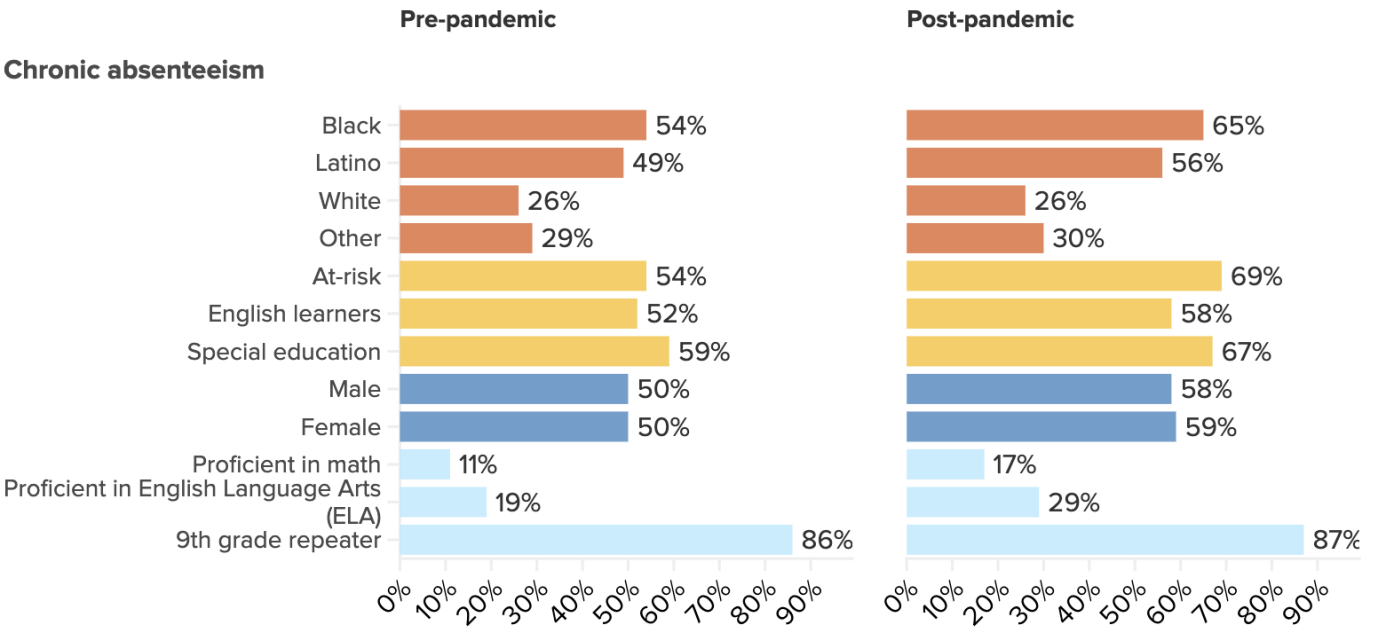
Figure 7. Chronic absenteeism by subgroup in sample, pre- and post-pandemic



Source: Data requested from the Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE).
Note: Pre-pandemic averages school years 2017-18 and 2018-19, post-pandemic averages school years 2021-22 and 2022-23.

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Differences across student groups

Before the pandemic, chronic absenteeism for male and female students was identical at 50 percent. Post-pandemic, female students are slightly more likely than male students to be chronically absent: 59.4 percent for female students compared to 58 percent for male students, a statistically significant difference. In the post-pandemic sample, female students have higher chronic absenteeism in each grade level, with the gap growing to 3.5 percentage points by grade 12.

In the post-pandemic sample, 68.2 percent of all students are Black, compared to 20.3 percent of students who are Latino and 8.2 percent of students who are white (see Appendix C for details). By race and ethnicity, chronic absenteeism is highest for students who are Black (statistically higher than other students), at 65 percent post-pandemic, and it increased by 11.4 percentage points during this period. Chronic absenteeism did not change very much for white students or students of other races and ethnicities after the pandemic.

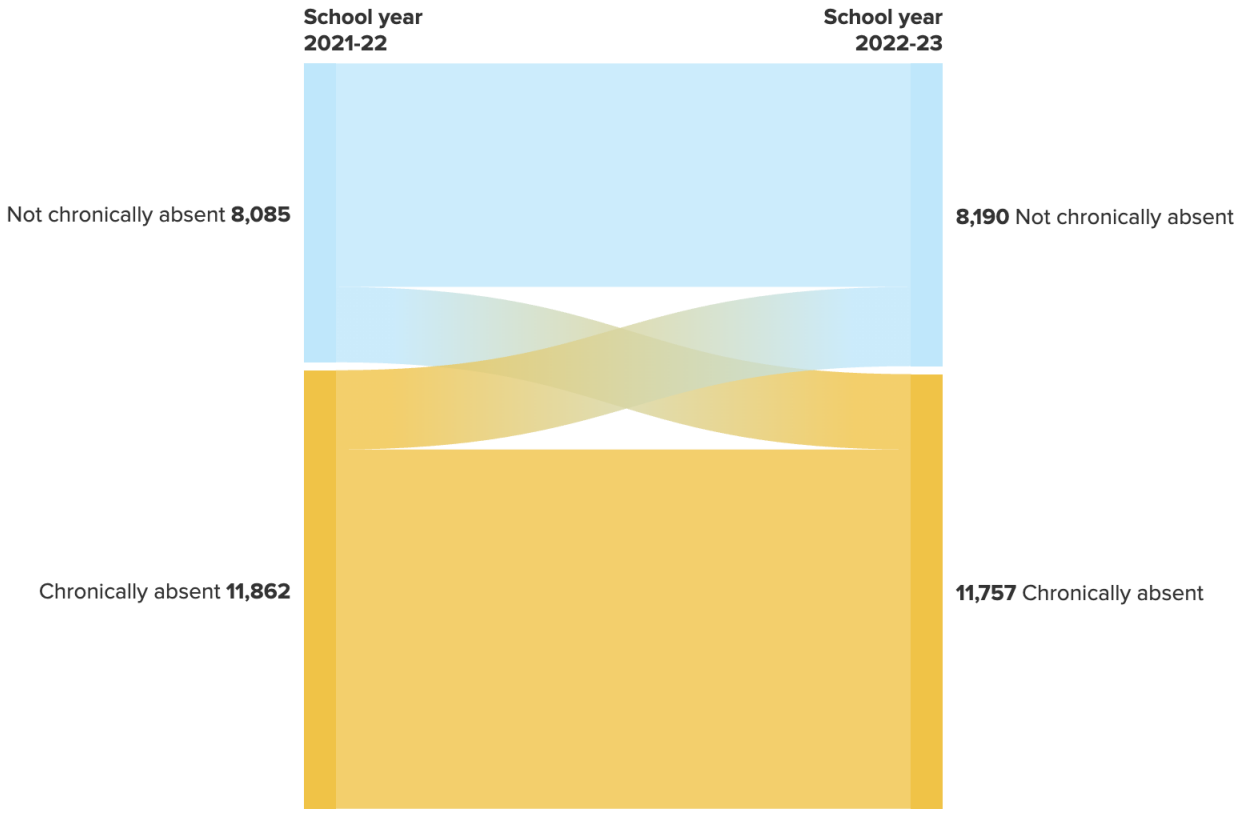
D.C. provides additional funding through its formula to support three special populations: students who are designated as at-risk,[16] English learners, and students with disabilities. Among these three, post-pandemic chronic absenteeism is statistically higher than average for both students who are economically disadvantaged and students with disabilities, with students who are economically disadvantaged having the largest increase of 14.6 percentage points.

Across the sample, 27.3 percent of grade 9 students were repeaters. Chronic absenteeism is more prevalent for grade 9 repeaters, with 87.4 percent of repeaters chronically absent in the post-pandemic period. Post-pandemic, 13.1 percent of grade 9 repeaters met or exceeded expectations in math and 34.1 percent did so in ELA (out of those who took the statewide assessments). Among all students who met or exceeded expectations in ELA, 28.7 percent were chronically absent (less than the average for all students) and 16.7 percent were chronically absent in this case for math. However, chronic absenteeism for those meeting expectations on the statewide assessment increased post-pandemic, indicating that a higher share of students are both chronically absent and meeting expectations.

PREDICTORS OF CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM, POST-PANDEMIC

Chronic absenteeism is sticky, with most students having similar attendance patterns from year to year. In school year 2021-22, 59 percent of students in grades 8 through 12 were chronically absent. In the following school year, most students maintained their attendance patterns. Out of the students in grades 8 through 12 who were chronically absent in school year 2021-22, 82 percent were still chronically absent in school year 2022-23, and 18 percent were no longer chronically absent. Similarly, out of the students who were not chronically absent in school year 2021-22, 75 percent maintained this status the following year and 25 percent became chronically absent. Flows are presented in Figure 8.

Figure 8. Chronic absenteeism flows, post-pandemic



Between school years 2021-22 and 2022-23, 2,038 students went from "not chronically absent" to "chronically absent." 2,143 students went from "chronically absent" to "not chronically absent."

Source: Data requested from the Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE).

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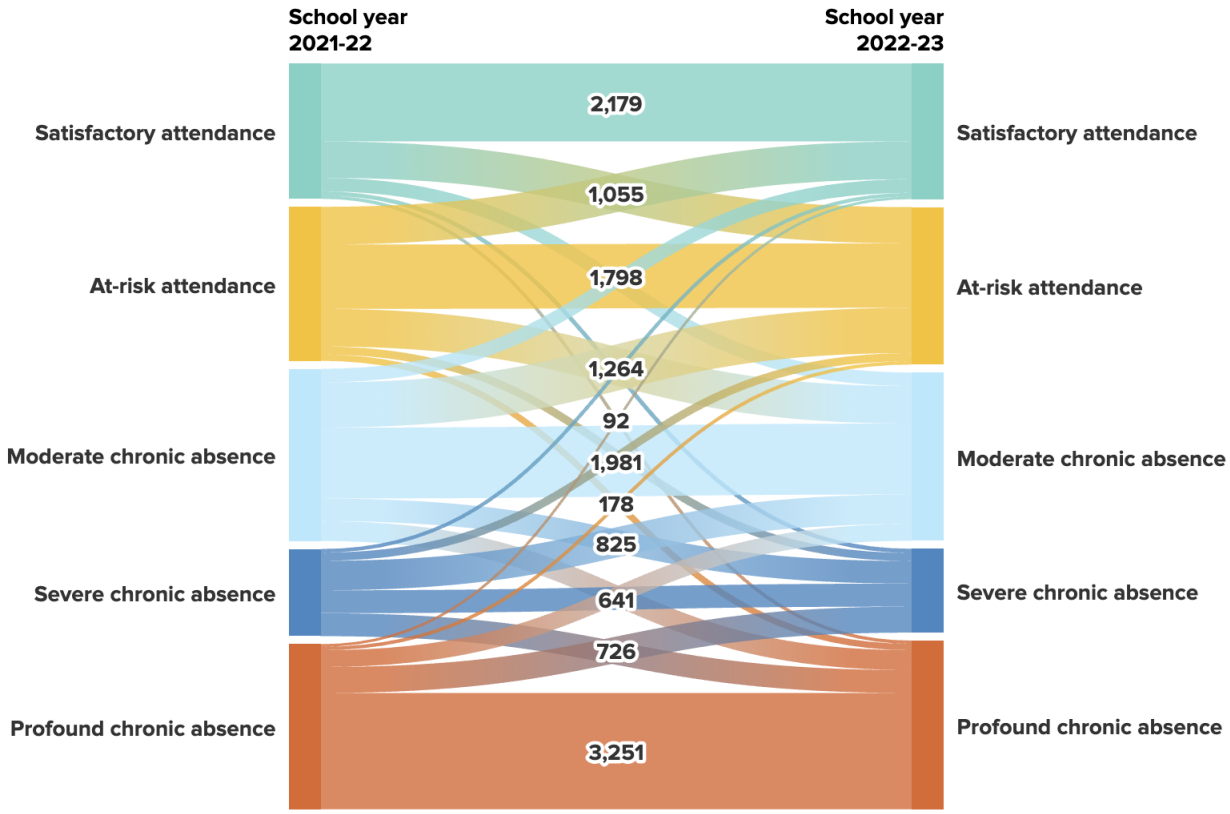
Movement between chronic absenteeism tiers

In addition to chronic absenteeism as a binary measure, OSSE tracks different tiers of attendance and chronic absenteeism to provide nuance on the amount of school missed. In school year 2021-22, 24 percent of students were close to having satisfactory attendance in the "moderate chronic absence" tier (missing 10-19.99%), 12 percent of students were in the "severe chronic absence" tier (missing 20-29.99%), and 26 percent of students were in the "profound chronic absence" tier (missing 30% or more). Moving to those who were not chronically absent, 18 percent of students were in the satisfactory attendance tier (missing less than 5%), and 20 percent were in the at-risk attendance tier (missing 5- 9.99%).

Looking at the group who changed and are no longer chronically absent, they are most likely to be in the moderate chronic absenteeism group in the previous year (77 percent of changers in this category), making this an important group to target for attendance interventions. On the flip side, students who changed to now be chronically absent were most likely to have at-risk attendance in the previous year (71 percent of changers in this category). A look at flows between attendance patterns is included in Figure 9.

Figure 9. Chronic absenteeism flows post-pandemic, by tier



Source: Data requested from the Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE).

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What predicts chronic absence after grade 8 and throughout high school?

Logistic regression analysis shows which student characteristics, including demographics, special populations, and achievement factors, are associated with chronic absenteeism while controlling for other characteristics at the transition point to high school (full models and regression tables are reported in Appendix D).

Models predicting chronic absenteeism in grade 9 show that chronic absenteeism in grade 8 is significant and the largest predictor of students being chronically absent in grade 9, even when controlling for other student characteristics. Being economically disadvantaged is also significant and a strong predictor of chronic absenteeism. On the other hand, meeting or exceeding expectations on the statewide assessment is associated with satisfactory attendance, as is attending a public charter school. Race, gender, English learner status, and disability status are less consistent predictors in these models that control for other characteristics.

Shifts from pre-pandemic

Compared to pre-pandemic, being economically disadvantaged and not

attending a public charter school are slightly less important as contributing factors to chronic absenteeism for students in grade 8 as they transition to grade 9. Conversely, achievement on the statewide assessment in math is slightly more important. Other variables are mixed.

What predicts chronic absenteeism from year to year in high school? (post-pandemic cohort)

We find similar results in models predicting chronic absenteeism at each high school grade level and across all high school grades collectively. Students who were chronically absent in high school grades were more likely to be chronically absent in the following year, even more than in middle school. These effects are slightly lower when controlling for achievement on the statewide assessment. Isolating students in grade 9s shows that grade 9 repetition is significant and makes students twice as likely to be chronically absent.

Who changes their status from year to year?

Post-pandemic, D.C.'s chronic absenteeism has steadily decreased each year since peaking in school year 2021-22. Among secondary school students in this sample, economically disadvantaged students are the most likely to improve their attendance status from being chronically absent in school year 2021-22 to satisfactory attendance in school year 2022-23. This suggests that some interventions targeting this group may be working to curb absenteeism. For students moving up from grade 8 to grade 9, enrollment in a public charter school is also associated with these attendance improvements. However, these variables explain very little of the variation in changes in chronic absenteeism, suggesting that other factors are more likely to be associated with shifts from year to year.

What is the association between chronic absence in grade 8 and achievement? (post-pandemic cohort)

In addition to implications for lower postsecondary enrollment and other outcomes,[20] chronic absenteeism is associated with lower levels of achievement on the statewide assessment, or PARCC. Achievement on this assessment is grouped into five levels: Level 1 (Did Not Yet Meet Expectations); Level 2 (Partially Met Expectations); Level 3 (Approached Expectations); Level 4 (Met Expectations); and Level 5 (Exceeded Expectations). Levels 4 and 5 are considered "college and career ready".

Post-pandemic, being just over the threshold for chronic absenteeism (missing between 10 and 19.99 percent of the school year) is associated with a decrease of one-third in a student's PARCC level, controlling for student characteristics (see Appendix F for OLS regression results). Being severely chronically absent (missing 20 to 29.99 percent of the school year) is associated with a half level decrease in PARCC scores, and being profoundly chronically absent (missing 30 percent or more of the school year) is associated with a two-thirds level decrease in PARCC scores.

WHAT IS THE IMPACT OF SCHOOLS ON ATTENDANCE?

In addition to student-level characteristics, there is also a possibility that peer effects matter: If a student attends a school with higher rates of chronic absenteeism, they are more likely to be absent themselves. When the school-level chronic absenteeism rate is included in models, it has a stronger relationship pre-pandemic, with students attending a school with a high chronic absenteeism rate more likely to be absent themselves—especially in high school and less so in grade 8. Post-pandemic, the high school association has weakened and has shifted for grade 8 so that it no longer is related to a student's chronic absence (see Appendix D).

School approaches

In D.C., there are some systemwide required inventions around unexcused absences, with referrals to a Student Support Team (SST), the Child and Family Services Agency (CFSA), and court, depending on the age and number of unexcused absences. Schools are also required to contact families after one unexcused absence.

Schools layer on their own attendance interventions, both to proactively encourage attendance and to react to absences once they occur. In interviews, many school leaders shared that increased student check-ins and trusted adult relationships contributed to their school's attendance growth, and punitive measures were less helpful. In addition, they mentioned incentives–creating a sense of belonging for students and families, checking in with students on why they are missing, and educating families on where their children will be academically if they miss school. After absences occur, for example, DCPS sends a robo-call after each unexcused absence, and then implements additional interventions if unexcused absences are cumulative, including sending an absence letter, calling the student's home, holding a meeting with the parent, reviewing what additional supports are needed, and referrals to other agencies.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND CONCLUSIONS

D.C. has set an ambitious goal to cut chronic absenteeism in half to 24 percent by school year 2027-28. This will require a special focus on high school students, where chronic absenteeism is higher. For this group, based on this report's findings, some recommendations emerge:

- Attendance in grade 9 is heavily influenced by grade 8 patterns. Interventions to improve attendance in high school should begin intentionally in middle school.
- Similarly, grade 9 is a tough transition for attendance, making it another year of focus for interventions, especially with repeaters.
- Learning outcomes are lower for those who miss more school, even controlling for other characteristics, and this needs to be communicated to families. Interventions like high-impact tutoring, which has been shown to improve attendance in D.C., can be a part of the solution.[17]
- The group most likely to improve their chronic absenteeism status is the moderately chronic absenteeism group. Interventions like behavioral nudges should be continued as effective for this group.
- Economically disadvantaged students are likely to be chronically absent, making them another focus for targeted interventions that work, like mentoring, providing school-based health care, addressing asthma, and tutoring programs.
- For high school students, who are more likely to be chronically absent, strategies such as building stronger student-teacher relationships, texting families, developing relevant curriculum, free meals, and laundry at school are promising strategies for improving attendance.
- More research is necessary to understand certain trends, like better attendance among students who attended charter schools and higher chronic absenteeism for female students.

APPENDIX A. METHODOLOGY

Definitions

The Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE) defines chronic absence as the percentage of enrolled students who were absent, including both excused and unexcused partial and full-day absences, for at least 10 percent of enrolled instructional days.[18] Importantly, the definition for being present shifted during the sample period. Pre-pandemic and in school year 2021-22, a student was considered present if they were present for at least 80 percent of the instructional day. However, the definition of present shifted from 80 percent to 60 percent of the instructional day for the 2022-23 school year (a "60/40 rule").

Data sources

To conduct these analyses, we used de-identified student-level data files from OSSE for four school years, including two pre-pandemic (2017-18 and 2018-19) and two post-pandemic (2021-22 and 2022-23) for students in grades 8 through 12. These files contained school information, grade, chronic absenteeism tier, student characteristics (gender, race and ethnicity, ward of residence), special population flags (English Learner, economically disadvantaged, student with a disability, first time in grade 9), and learning outcomes (statewide assessment results in ELA and math).

Methods

The models predict chronic absenteeism using three core cohorts in the pre- and post-pandemic periods: (i) 8th graders transitioning to high school; (ii) high school students in the following year; and (iii) 9th graders in their following year to account for repetition. The multi-year regressions limit the sample to students who were enrolled in two consecutive years, and do not include students who entered or exited D.C.'s public schools (students who switched schools between years are in the sample).

Regression models

Logistic regressions were used to predict chronic absenteeism as a dichotomous measure. For control variables, models incorporated student characteristics (gender, race and ethnicity), special populations (English Learner, economically disadvantaged, student with a disability, first time in grade 9), learning outcomes, and previous chronic absence. The models separated pre- and post-pandemic cohorts, as well as grade 8 from other high school grades.

Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression was used to predict learning outcomes (level on the statewide PARCC assessment), with independent variables including chronic absenteeism risk tier as well as other student characteristics.

Coefficients in logistic regression models are odds ratios that represent the effect of a unit change in the independent variable (for example, economic disadvantage) on the odds of chronic absence (or other binary outcome). For example, an odds ratio of 0.75 means that a 1 unit increase in the independent variable leads to a 25 percent decrease (1.0 minus 0.75) in the odds of being chronically absent. On the other hand, an odds ratio above 1, like of 1.75 means that a 1 unit change in the independent variable leads to a 75 percent increase in the odds of being chronically absent.

APPENDIX B. DEMOGRAPHICS AND CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM

Rates of chronic absenteeism by student subgroup for students who were enrolled in grades 8-12, pre- and post-pandemic years

Enrolled in pre-pandemic years	Grade 8	Grade 9	Grade 10	Grade 11	Grade 12	Total
Total	27.09	53.68	51.87	55.09	63.98	50.05
Gender						
Male	28.61	54.79	52.35	54.53	61.92	50.22
Female	25.55	52.52	51.37	55.65	65.93	49.87
Race/ethnicity						
Black/African American	31.65	58.85	54.97	57.17	65	53.62
Hispanic/Latino	20.12	49.46	54.19	59.24	65.87	49.16
White	10.2	20.13	25.83	32.29	54.04	25.8
Other	13.71	26.52	29.18	33.05	49.22	29.27
Special populations						
At-risk	31.31	58.49	56.85	59.46	65.71	54.43
Special education	39.73	66.52	65.45	62.02	61.92	59.44
English learner	21.16	50.57	58.48	62.38	67.34	52.41
Achievement indicators						
9th grade repeater		85.94				85.94
Proficient in math	9.78	11.26	14.99			10.94
Proficient in English Language Arts (ELA)	13.1	21.98	24.47			18.79

Rates of chronic absenteeism by student subgroup for students who were enrolled in grades 8-12, pre- and post-pandemic years (continued)

Enrolled in post-pandemic years	Grade 8	Grade 9	Grade 10	Grade 11	Grade 12	Total
Total	43.86	65.18	60.93	59.07	64.24	58.72
Gender						
Male	43.47	65.19	60.87	57.08	62.37	58.01
Female	44.23	65.2	61.03	60.95	65.93	59.44
Race/ethnicity						
Black/African American	51.02	71.86	67.92	64.77	67.66	65.03
Hispanic/Latino	39.31	59.69	56.57	59.05	66.62	55.66
White	13.23	25.54	24.29	26.62	43.24	25.63
Other	17.16	29.62	33.06	32.59	44.07	29.98
Special populations						
At-risk	54.71	74.55	72.22	69.84	72.72	68.97
Special education	54.71	73.71	70.07	68.61	67.58	67.26
English learner	40.65	61.05	61.12	65.7	69.42	58.01
Achievement indicators						
9th grade repeater		87.38				87.38
Proficient in math	14.21	19.28	17.21			16.65
Proficient in English Language Arts (ELA)	22.74	31.17	33.41			28.71

Statistical differences in chronic absenteeism between student groups, pre- and post-pandemic cohorts

Pre-pandemic cohort	Students in group		Other students		Equality of means	
Student group	M	SD	M	SD	Difference	t-test
Black	0.54	0.50	0.41	0.49	-0.13	-25.07**
Students with disabilities	0.59	0.49	0.48	0.50	-0.12	-20.20**
Ninth grade repeater	0.86	0.35	0.47	0.50	-0.39	-43.58**
Economically disadvantaged	0.54	0.46	0.30	0.50	-0.25	-42.20**
Male	0.50	0.50	0.50	0.50	0.00	-0.77
English learner	0.52	0.50	0.50	0.50	-0.03	-3.48**
Meets or exceeds expectations in math	0.11	0.31	0.43	0.49	0.32	38.03**
Meets or exceeds expectations in ELA	0.19	0.39	0.45	0.50	0.27	38.82**

Post-pandemic cohort	Students in group		Other students		Equality of means	
Student group	M	SD	M	SD	Difference	t-test
Black	0.65	0.48	0.45	0.50	-0.20	-44.36**
Students with disabilities	0.67	0.47	0.57	0.50	-0.11	-20.06**
Ninth grade repeater	0.87	0.33	0.56	0.50	-0.31	-39.93**
Economically disadvantaged	0.69	0.46	0.39	0.49	-0.30	-71.034**
Male	0.58	0.49	0.59	0.49	0.01	3.36**
English learner	0.58	0.49	0.59	0.49	0.01	1.19
Meets or exceeds expectations in math	0.17	0.37	0.55	0.50	0.39	44.54**
Meets or exceeds expectations in ELA	0.29	0.45	0.60	0.49	0.32	53.42**

Notes: M = mean of chronic absenteeism, SD = standard deviation. **indicates that the difference is significant, $p < 0.01$.

APPENDIX C. DESCRIPTIVE STATISTICS

Descriptive statistics for students who were enrolled in grades 8-12, pre- and post-pandemic years

Enrolled in pre-pandemic years	Grade 8	Grade 9	Grade 10	Grade 11	Grade 12	Total
Gender						
Female	49.75	48.95	49.36	50.53	51.33	49.88
Male	50.25	51.05	50.64	49.47	48.67	50.12
Race and ethnicity						
Black	70.2	72.49	69.71	71.28	75.07	71.72
Latino	17.21	18.04	19.8	18.73	15.69	17.94
White	9.23	6.51	7.28	7.17	6.14	7.26
Other	3.36	2.96	3.21	2.82	3.1	3.09
Special populations						
Economically disadvantaged	78.4	84.06	82.82	82.82	82.98	82.28
Students with disabilities	19.36	20.66	19.01	17.64	19.05	19.26
English learner	7.76	11.39	12.15	10.83	7.79	10.1
Achievement indicators						
9th grade repeater	.	27.02	.	.	.	.
Proficient in math	25.28	21.13	9.88	3.05	1.43	19.43
Proficient in English Language Arts (ELA)	36.73	29.39	34.28	5.71	n<10	34.13
Student ward of residence						
Ward 1	8.46	8.48	9.28	8.57	8.47	8.65
Ward 2	1.36	1.55	1.44	1.37	1.5	1.45
Ward 3	5.98	4.4	4.96	5.19	4.95	5.06
Ward 4	16.3	15.82	17.39	17.32	15.93	16.51
Ward 5	13.79	13.02	13.78	13.35	13.19	13.41
Ward 6	8.62	8.69	8.44	7.62	8.75	8.45
Ward 7	19.44	20.04	18.48	20.11	21.28	19.84
Ward 8	22.52	23.53	21.86	22.38	22	22.53
Unknown	3.53	4.46	4.37	4.1	3.94	4.1
Sector						
DCPS	51.15	58.18	62.68	64.07	66.1	60.07
Public charter	48.85	41.82	37.32	35.93	33.9	39.93

Enrolled in post-pandemic years	Grade 8	Grade 9	Grade 10	Grade 11	Grade 12	Total
Gender						
Female	49.46	49.49	49.16	51.48	52.42	50.16
Male	50.52	50.39	50.66	48.43	47.55	49.74
Race and ethnicity						
Black	66.87	69.52	68.26	67.57	68.06	68.19
Latino	19.95	21.44	20.3	19.89	18.65	20.25
White	9.35	6.3	7.97	8.91	9.87	8.21
Other	3.83	2.74	3.47	3.62	3.43	3.36
Special populations						
Economically disadvantaged	65.69	70.98	65.41	64.08	62.07	66.36
Students with disabilities	20.02	20.13	19.88	18.47	19.9	19.76
English learner	11.91	14.17	9.94	8.74	8.76	11.2
Achievement indicators						
9th grade repeater	.	27.33	.	.	.	.
Proficient in math	17.35	12.11	7.58	14.76	1.72	13.13
Proficient in English Language Arts (ELA)	35.12	31.35	36.5	8.86	n<10	34.06
Student ward of residence						
Ward 1	8.7	10.02	9.66	9.54	9.17	9.47
Ward 2	2.78	2.59	2.62	2.58	2.72	2.65
Ward 3	6.33	4.99	5.91	6.87	7.01	6.05
Ward 4	17.28	16.67	17.15	17.56	17.59	17.17
Ward 5	14.26	13.69	14.74	15.1	15.06	14.45
Ward 6	6.37	6.21	6.12	5.84	6.2	6.17
Ward 7	20.37	21.1	20.66	19.8	20.01	20.49
Ward 8	22.16	23.67	22.23	21.81	21.55	22.46
Unknown	1.75	1.06	0.9	0.89	0.69	1.09
Sector						
DCPS	52.18	60.96	63.85	62.97	64.12	60.46
Public charter	47.82	39.04	36.15	37.03	35.88	39.54

Note: Data have been suppressed (n<10) where there were fewer than 10 individuals in a particular group.

APPENDIX D. LOGISTIC REGRESSION ANALYSIS

Predictors of chronic absenteeism in the following year for 8th graders in D.C. post-pandemic odds ratios

	(1)	(2)	(3)
	Grade 8 no PARCC	Grade 8 PARCC	Grade 8 PARCC and school CA
VARIABLES	Odds ratios	Odds ratios	Odds ratios
Chronically absent			
Black	1.450***	1.146	1.220**
	(0.133)	(0.113)	(0.122)
Economically disadvantaged	2.938***	2.236***	2.706***
	(0.308)	(0.252)	(0.335)
Students with Disabilities	1.282***	1.053	1.058
	(0.108)	(0.0951)	(0.0985)
Male	0.941	0.891	0.885*
	(0.0637)	(0.0637)	(0.0643)
English learner	0.886	0.696***	0.702***
	(0.107)	(0.0916)	(0.0933)
Chronically absent in the prior year	6.811***	5.909***	6.767***
	(0.465)	(0.423)	(0.532)
Meets or exceeds expectations in math		0.531***	0.551***
		(0.0703)	(0.0734)
Meets or exceeds expectations in ELA		0.542***	0.541***
		(0.0505)	(0.0511)
Public charter school	0.534***	0.576***	0.573***
	(0.0365)	(0.0412)	(0.0416)
School chronic absenteeism rate			0.481***
			(0.0918)
Constant	0.181***	0.379***	0.417***
	(0.0190)	(0.0505)	(0.0574)
Observations	4,984	4,594	4,493
Pseudo R-squared	0.218	0.224	0.231

seEform in parentheses

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Predictors of chronic absenteeism in the following year for 9th to 12th graders in D.C. post-pandemic odds ratios

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	High school no PARCC	High school PARCC	High school with PARCC and school CA	Ninth grade with PARCC and repeaters
VARIABLES	Odds Ratios	Odds Ratios	Odds Ratios	Odds Ratios
Chronically absent				
Black	1.346***	1.202**	1.180**	1.200**
	(0.0745)	(0.0982)	(0.0966)	(0.0983)
Economically disadvantaged	1.855***	1.925***	1.734***	1.897***
	(0.114)	(0.189)	(0.183)	(0.188)
Students with Disabilities	1.071	1.159*	1.171**	1.142*
	(0.0583)	(0.0918)	(0.0937)	(0.0907)
Male	0.938	0.821***	0.826***	0.810***
	(0.0397)	(0.0502)	(0.0510)	(0.0497)
English learner	1.401***	0.947	0.941	0.955
	(0.110)	(0.115)	(0.114)	(0.116)
Chronically absent	13.41***	11.45***	10.85***	11.39***
	(0.583)	(0.719)	(0.734)	(0.717)
Meets or exceeds expectations in math		0.607***	0.622***	0.610***
		(0.0741)	(0.0760)	(0.0746)
Meets or exceeds expectations in ELA		0.547***	0.574***	0.558***
		(0.0415)	(0.0441)	(0.0425)
Public charter school	0.906**	0.781***	0.823***	0.780***
	(0.0402)	(0.0487)	(0.0546)	(0.0487)
School chronic absenteeism rate			1.571***	
			(0.269)	
Ninth grade repeater				2.086***
				(0.304)
Constant	0.175***	0.217***	0.177***	0.213***
	(0.0108)	(0.0255)	(0.0242)	(0.0252)
Observations	14,963	7,150	7,057	7,150
Pseudo R-squared	0.281	0.297	0.298	0.300

seEform in parentheses

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Predictors of chronic absenteeism in the following year for 8th graders in D.C. pre-pandemic odds ratios

	(1)	(2)	(3)
	Grade 8 no PARCC	Grade 8 PARCC	Grade 8 PARCC and school CA
VARIABLES	Odds ratios	Odds ratios	Odds ratios
Chronically absent			
Black	1.496***	1.262**	1.180
	(0.150)	(0.133)	(0.128)
Economically disadvantaged	3.825***	2.845***	2.548***
	(0.449)	(0.355)	(0.334)
Students with Disabilities	1.480***	1.258**	1.327***
	(0.137)	(0.126)	(0.136)
Male	0.997	0.913	0.902
	(0.0741)	(0.0711)	(0.0715)
English learner	0.854	0.691**	0.692**
	(0.126)	(0.110)	(0.111)
Chronically absent	6.919***	6.129***	6.087***
	(0.620)	(0.579)	(0.604)
Meets or exceeds expectations in math		0.619***	0.634***
		(0.0737)	(0.0763)
Meets or exceeds expectations in ELA		0.551***	0.560***
		(0.0593)	(0.0612)
Public charter school	0.430***	0.455***	0.498***
	(0.0326)	(0.0358)	(0.0431)
School chronic absenteeism rate			2.689***
			(0.940)
Constant	0.159***	0.326***	0.281***
	(0.0194)	(0.0492)	(0.0452)
Observations	4,058	3,826	3,726
Pseudo R-squared	0.202	0.209	0.215

seEform in parentheses

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

Predictors of chronic absenteeism in the following year for 9th to 12th graders in D.C. pre-pandemic odds ratios

	(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)
	High school no PARCC	High school PARCC	High school with PARCC and school CA	Ninth grade with PARCC and repeaters
VARIABLES	Odds Ratios	Odds Ratios	Odds Ratios	Odds Ratios
Chronically absent				
Black	1.221***	0.818	0.760*	0.834
	(0.0735)	(0.124)	(0.117)	(0.127)
Economically disadvantaged	1.951***	2.060***	1.711***	2.052***
	(0.130)	(0.411)	(0.337)	(0.408)
Students with Disabilities	1.091	1.011	0.950	1.011
	(0.0652)	(0.131)	(0.128)	(0.132)
Male	0.935	0.903	0.889	0.901
	(0.0422)	(0.0931)	(0.0949)	(0.0931)
English learner	1.164*	0.925	0.861	0.947
	(0.0927)	(0.172)	(0.163)	(0.177)
Chronically absent	15.62***	13.10***	11.38***	12.64***
	(0.759)	(1.408)	(1.275)	(1.363)
Meets or exceeds expectations in math		0.441***	0.539***	0.440***
		(0.0965)	(0.122)	(0.0967)
Meets or exceeds expectations in ELA		0.492***	0.632***	0.506***
		(0.0704)	(0.0947)	(0.0726)
Public charter school	0.319***	0.282***	0.418***	0.298***
	(0.0150)	(0.0293)	(0.0568)	(0.0314)
School chronic absenteeism rate			5.860***	
			(1.922)	
Ninth grade repeater				2.449***
				(0.670)
Constant	0.379***	0.687	0.296***	0.637*
	(0.0249)	(0.170)	(0.0875)	(0.158)
Observations	13,583	2,792	2,665	2,792
Pseudo R-squared	0.319	0.340	0.352	0.343

seEform in parentheses

*** p<0.01, ** p<0.05, * p<0.1

ENDNOTES

1 Ed Data Express. 2025. Chronic absenteeism data. Department of Education. Retrieved from https://eddataexpress.ed.gov/resources/reports-and-files/chronic-absenteeism-data

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3 Attendance Works. "Continued High Levels of Chronic Absence, With Some Improvements, Require Action." Attendance Works. Retrieved from https://www.attendanceworks.org/continued-high-levels-of-chronic-absence-with-some-improvements-require-action/

4 Maryland State Department of Education. Chronic absenteeism for school years 2018-19, 2021-22, & 2022-23. Retrieved from https://reportcard.msde.maryland.gov/SchoolsList/Index?l=15

5 Every Day Counts! 2025. "Attendance Policies." Office of the Deputy Mayor for Education. Retrieved from https://attendance.dc.gov/page/attendance-policies

6 5-E DCMR § 2101.4

7 Attendance Works. 2025. "Chronic absence: Root causes." Attendance Works. Retrieved from https://www.attendanceworks.org/chronic-absence/addressing-chronic-absence/3-tiers-of-intervention/root-causes/

8 Attendance Works. 2024. "The Impact of School Mental Health Services on Reducing Chronic Absence." Attendance Works. Retrieved from https://www.attendanceworks.org/the-impact-of-school-mental-health-services-on-reducing-chronic-absenteeism/#:~:text=Students%20who%20are%20experiencing%20well,children%20and%20those%20experiencing%20poverty.

9 Office of the State Superintendent for Education (OSSE). 2025. District of Columbia Attendance Report, School Year 2023-24. OSSE. Retrieved from https://osse.dc.gov/node/1720676

10 Coffin, C. and Mason. H. 2025. State of D.C. Schools, 2023-24: Strong system health and modest progress. D.C. Policy Center. Retrieved from https://www.dcpolicycenter.org/publications/state-of-d-c-schools-2023-24/

11 Coffin, C. and Mason. H. 2025. State of D.C. Schools, 2023-24: Strong system health and modest progress. D.C. Policy Center. Retrieved from https://www.dcpolicycenter.org/publications/state-of-d-c-schools-2023-24/

12 In addition to chronic absenteeism, OSSE tracks different tiers of absenteeism and chronic absenteeism, which is extremely helpful in providing more nuance on the amount of school missed. In school year 2023-24, 40 percent of students were chronically absent, but there was great variation in the amount of school that students missed. 22 percent of students were in the "moderate chronic absence" tier (missing 10-19.99%), 8 percent of students were in the "severe chronic absence" tier (missing 20-29.99%), and 9 percent of students were in the "profound chronic absence" tier (missing 30% or more). About a third of the students were in the satisfactory attendance tier (32 percent missed less than 5%), and

29 percent were in the at-risk attendance tier (missing 5- 9.99%) or the satisfactory attendance tier (32 percent missed less than 5%).

13 Coffin, C. and Mason, H.2025. State of D.C. Schools, 2023-24: Strong system health and modest progress. D.C. Policy Center. Retrieved from https://www.dcpolicycenter.org/publications/state-of-d-c-schools-2023-24/

14 Coffin, C. 2025 "Chart of the week: December peak in school absences is higher post-pandemic for D.C.'s students." D.C. Policy Center. Retrieved from https://www.dcpolicycenter.org/publications/chart-of-the-week-december-peak-in-school-absences-dc-students/

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16 Students are designated as "at-risk" if they met one or more of the following criteria: experiencing homelessness, being in the District's foster care system, qualifying for Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program or the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), or being overage in high school.

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