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Maine students are missing more school days than before the pandemic

Chronic absenteeism rates are more than 10 percentage points higher than the 2018-19 school year. Experts say resources to get students to class aren't back on track.
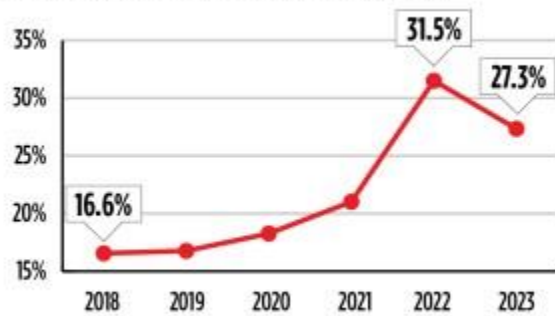
BY [LANA COHEN](#)PRESS HERALD

Almost one-third of Maine's K-12 students missed at least 18 days of school last year.

Chronic absenteeism nearly doubled during the pandemic and has yet to taper off. And though it has improved slightly in the last year, there are still far more absences than in the years preceding the pandemic, according to new state data provided in response to a request from the Press Herald.

Education experts say this is because of transportation issues, [youth mental health crises](#), increased financial and family obligations on students, and general disengagement following years of online learning.

Chronic absenteeism in Maine schools

Students who miss at least 18 days of school, or 10% of the school year, are marked as chronically absent.

During the 2018-19 school year, 16.8% of Maine students met that definition. In the 2021-22 school year, the year most schools resumed regular scheduling following the height of the pandemic, that jumped to 31.5%.

Attendance rates improved during the 2022-23 school year, dropping to 27.3%, according to Maine Department of Education data released Nov. 17. But the sustained, elevated rate shows that the issue may have significant staying power and that reengaging students is likely to be challenging and require considerable resources.

Maine's data aligns with national trends. During the 2018-19 school year, around 15% of the nation's K-12 students were chronically absent. That number jumped to 30% in the 2021-22 school year, the latest year for which national data is available.

Chronic absenteeism has long been a problem, but like many issues, it was exacerbated by the pandemic.

Now schools need to work on engaging students, said Hedy Chang, the executive director of Attendance Works, a nonprofit working to improve school attendance nationwide.

"People don't always see how important attendance is," Chang said. "But if kids are absent, all the other investments you put into schools won't do anything."

Experts say missing a lot of class days can negatively impact academic, social-emotional and socioeconomic growth.

Schools need to connect with students and their families, help them see the value of school, connect them with appropriate mental health and social service resources, get students involved in activities and community, and help them build connections, Chang said.

"Schools open doors to opportunities," said Jess Anderson, executive director of Count ME in Maine, an organization working to increase school attendance in the state. "If you don't walk through the doors every morning you can't have access to those opportunities."

Schools are tasked with educating the nation's students – teaching them to read, write, understand mathematics and think critically. But they often do much more than that. Schools are where students make friends, participate in extracurricular activities, have fun, and learn to create community and interact with peers and adults. Schools also provide meals and access to social services including mental and medical health support.

Experts say chronically absent students are less likely to achieve a variety of positive education outcomes from mastering early reading skills to graduating high school. High levels of absenteeism also threaten to hinder COVID-19 learning loss recovery and could grow inequality, they say.

Economically disadvantaged students were more likely to be chronically absent than their more well-off counterparts, according to the Maine education data. As were Indigenous, Hispanic and mixed-race students.

According to experts on attendance in Maine, students in western and northern parts of the state struggled more with chronic absenteeism than those attending school in southern Maine.

Understanding why students are missing school is a key question. Family and financial obligations, anxiety, sickness, lack of transportation and general disengagement are all reasons kids don't show up, experts say.

Physically getting to school has become harder and more time consuming since the pandemic. That's because of the national bus driver shortage that worsened during the pandemic. In recent years, school districts across the state have canceled bus routes due to the shortage, leaving students from families without another transportation option out of luck.

At the same time, more students are homeless, food insecure, living in poverty and facing anxiety and other mental health issues, all significant issues that can make education take a back seat.

Additionally, the [teacher shortage](#) and turnover make it challenging for educators to meaningfully engage with students and gives them one more reason not to show up.

The Maine Department of Education said that while it is encouraged by the decline in chronic absenteeism since the pandemic peak, it sees that there are improvements to be made.

"Regular school attendance is incredibly important to student success," Marcus Mrowka, a department spokesperson, said in a statement.

"The Maine Department of Education is committed to supporting educators and schools to foster learning environments that deeply engage students and provide them with multiple pathways to cultivate and pursue their passions."