

MICHIGAN

Michigan had 4th highest rate of K-12 absenteeism in first full year after COVID: Study



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Michigan students were absent from school in record numbers following the initial impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, a trend that also affected millions of other school children around the nation.

Michigan had the fourth highest rate of K-12 student absenteeism among 40 states and the District of Columbia during the 2021-22 school year, the first full year of in-person instruction after COVID-19 shuttered buildings, according to a new report out of Stanford University in partnership with the Associated Press.

A whopping 38.5% — or 546,622 — of the state's 1.4 million K-12 students missed 10% or more days of school that year. That's a nearly doubling of the pre-pandemic 2018-19 academic year, when 19.7% of students missed that much school.

While data from the most recent school year — 2022-23 — is not yet available in Michigan or most states, across the country, students have been absent at record rates since schools reopened during the pandemic, the AP reported.

More than a quarter of U.S. students missed at least 10% of the 2021-22 school year, making them chronically absent, according to the most recent data available. Before the pandemic, 15% of students missed that much school.

All told, an estimated 6.5 million additional students became chronically absent across the country, according to the data, which was compiled by Stanford University education professor Thomas Dee in partnership with the AP. The data from the 40 states and Washington, D.C., provides the most comprehensive accounting of absenteeism nationwide.

Absences were more prevalent among Latino, Black and low-income students, according to Dee's analysis.

Michigan defines chronically absent as students who missed 10% or more of possible days during the scheduled school year. A student who attends fewer than 90% of scheduled school days is considered chronically absent by this federal definition.

Only Alaska, the District of Columbia and New Mexico had rates higher than Michigan at 48.6%, 48% and 40.4%, respectively, according to Dee's research.

The absences come on top of the time students missed during school closures and pandemic disruptions. They cost crucial classroom time as schools work to recover from massive learning setbacks amid large federal, state and local spending on academic recovery to counter the damages of COVID.

Absent students miss out not only on instruction but all the other things schools provide — meals, counseling, socialization. In the end, students who are chronically absent — missing 18 or more days a year, in most places — are at a higher risk of not learning to read and eventually dropping out.

"Enrollment loss, COVID-19 case rates and school masking policies are not associated with the state-level growth in chronic absenteeism," Lee writes in the reports. "This suggests the sharp rise in chronic absenteeism reflects other important barriers to learning such as declining youth mental health, academic disengagement that merit further scrutiny and policy responses."

Reasons for surge explored

Why students are missing school is not reflected in the data for Michigan or nationally, but Lee said it begs the question of whether there is a large-scale failure among students to re-engage in school following the COVID-19 pandemic.

It could reflect a response to COVID illness or the risk of illness or a reaction to state school-masking mandates, Lee said in his report about the data. Or it could be a measurement artifact of enrollment loss, he said — a behavior that looks like it occurs more often than it really does because of the way it is measured.

State-level growth in chronic absenteeism is unrelated to COVID cases per person during this period, state masking mandates and enrollment loss, Lee said.

Absences worsened in every state with available data. But the analysis found growth in chronic absenteeism did not correlate strongly with state COVID rates.

According to educators and families, kids are staying home for myriad reasons — finances, housing instability, illness, transportation issues, school staffing shortages, anxiety, depression, bullying and generally feeling unwelcome at school.

Hazel Park Schools Superintendent Amy Kruppe told The Detroit News on Thursday that attendance has been a tough issue and there are lots of reasons kids don't come to school, from lack of transportation to feeling unprepared.

"Kids are panicked. They are worried about getting sick or being sent home. Mental health concerns are a big concern. Leaving home to come to school has been difficult," Kruppe said. "When you are struggling with not being successful academically, it's hard to put your best face on when you are back in school."

And the effects of online learning linger: School relationships have frayed, and after months at home, many parents and students don't see the point of regular attendance.

"For almost two years, we told families that school can look different and that schoolwork could be accomplished in times outside of the traditional 8-to-3 day. Families got used to that," Elmer Roldan, of Communities in Schools of Los Angeles, which helps schools follow up with absent students, told the AP.

What Michigan is doing

Michigan has struggled with chronic absenteeism for years. Before the pandemic, in the 2018-19 school year, Michigan had the seventh highest chronic absenteeism rate in the country.

Rates are higher for poor, Black and homeless students and students with disabilities, according to state data.

Officials at the the Michigan Department of Education said they are aware of the issue and are taking steps to address it.

"While we have more to do in local districts to reduce chronic absenteeism, Michigan identified the issue early and took action — including launching a tiered approach to universal support for all students, known as Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS), and a

data-driven Early Warning and Intervention Monitoring System," Michigan Department of Education spokesman Martin Ackley said.

To address chronic absenteeism, the Detroit Public Schools Community District announced last month it is launching health hubs inside 12 schools to address behavioral, physical and dental needs that might send students home from school or keep them from coming to class altogether.

Services that will be available go beyond what existing clinics offer, including basic health care, such as physicals and check-ins with a nurse; mental health services for children and families; dental care; family resource centers offering help with evictions, paying energy bills and legal services; and a food pantry. The percentage of Detroit students who were chronically absent fell to 30% in 2021-22 after peaking at 70% during the 2017-18 school year.

Principals at two Detroit public schools said the reasons for students being chronically absent run the gamut from a tummy ache to homelessness.

"It can be anything as minor as 'I didn't have clean clothes' or as severe as 'My asthma keeps flaring up,' or someone at home who gets the children to school may have health issues," said Latoyia Webb, principal of Durfee Elementary-Middle School. "It's a wide range, even 'I don't have a roof over my head.'"

At Osborn High School, where 400 are enrolled, principal Jamita Lewis said it comes down to a lack of resources at home.

"Perhaps they don't have the uniform or the utilities on at home or they don't have access to get to school and health care," Lewis said. "Having food pantries at school will allow them to come to school every day so now you don't have that barrier anymore."

School attendance has been a primary focus for the district after it created and implemented a district-wide attendance plan.

Detroit sees improvement

The Detroit district's policy is that students who have missed at least 10% of the school year are considered chronically absent/truant.

Consequences include possible failure in class or grade level, investigation by an attendance agent, referral of a student to Michigan Department of Health and Human Services for action

and referral of parents to the Wayne County Prosecutor's Office for prosecution.

Chronically absent rates for the 2022-23 school year, which just ended in June, showed improvement, Detroit officials said, moving to 69% compared with 77% the year prior.

"We are proud of this improvement but are not satisfied," Detroit Superintendent Nikolai Vitti told The News. "It was not easy to shift the organization and people's thinking out of the real challenges the pandemic created. However, we knew we had to return to our reform and improvement agenda or students would fall farther behind. The reform effort had to include improving chronic absenteeism."

"Our performance data is clear: Our students are three to five times more likely to be at or above grade level in literacy and math and to be college ready when they miss less than nine days of school," Vitti said. "We will build on this improvement for next year and expect to continue to reduce chronic absenteeism."

In the Lansing Public School District, schools were closed for the full 2020-21 school year, so students and families made their first return to buildings and classrooms in 2021-22, Superintendent Ben Shuldiner said.

Shuldiner, who took over the district in 2021, made attendance one of three major goals to improve by 2025. His office walls are covered in attendance data information including how severe the weather was — whether hot or cold — to determine what factors were in play.

To improve attendance, the district made a series of changes starting at the high school level, from placing all high school students on public busing via free passes to creating a new alternative high school education program for students who were not successful in traditional school, the Lansing superintendent said.

"We created a new alternative education hub that allows children to learn differently. It's offering them a place to go where they can work on a couch or online at their own speed in a building with adults that care deeply about them," Shuldiner said. "They are participating in school at much higher rate than before. They feel connected at the hub."

Shuldiner did not have exact number on Thursday but said the attendance increased four to seven percentage points compared with last year.

"The truth is modern schools are not the best way for students to learn," he said. "It's great for some and not for others, and we need to create multiple ways for children to learn."