Chronic Absenteeism in Washington DC: Pandemic Impact and Recovery in DC and Other Cities

Early indications are that Washington, DC's coordinated efforts on attendance are working, as attendance has improved by 9 percentage points and is outpacing most peer cities - even in the face of factors typically associated with worsening attendance, such as economic pressure and job loss.

Chronic absenteeism in DC schools surged in the wake of the pandemic, mirroring the experience of other urban cities and the nation overall. With the number of chronically absent students growing from 30% in 2019 to 48% during the 21-22 school year, the Every Day Counts! Taskforce sought to address attendance throughout the district.

The task force, chaired by the Deputy Mayor for Education (DME), was created in 2017 to address chronic absenteeism and truancy by coordinating agencies across education, health, child welfare, transportation, safety, and justice with a focus on community health, prevention, and attendance. The concerted efforts of the task force, city agencies, schools, and community organizations have resulted in a variety of successful approaches to addressing chronic absenteeism and meeting the needs of students and families in the District.

That said, sustaining and accelerating progress is a critical priority, particularly amongst high school students. As the Taskforce reflects on learnings from the last four years, this report aims to place the DC experience in the context of other cities, most notably Baltimore, Philadelphia, Chicago, and New York City.

Chronic Absenteeism Defined

Chronic absenteeism is defined as a student missing 10% or more school days for any reason, which[1] typically equates to 18 or more days of school each year. Chronically absent students have lower academic performance[1], score lower on reading and math proficiency tests[2], and graduate high school at lower rates.[3] Absenteeism is also linked to income level: students from low-income districts are three times more likely to be chronically absent than their peers.[4] More recent studies have indicated chronic absenteeism is responsible for a meaningful portion of pandemic-era learning loss.[5] As a result, addressing chronic absenteeism has been a priority for Mayor Bowser and city leaders.

The Taskforce has noted underlying causes of chronic absenteeism mirroring national drivers:

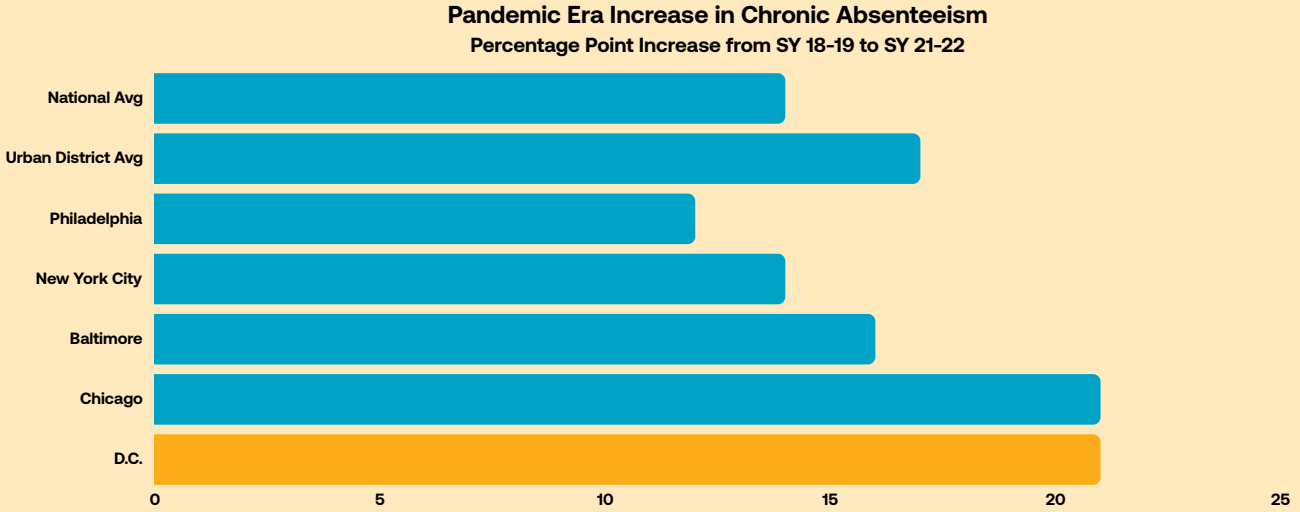
The drivers of absenteeism are multifaceted and interlocking: health conditions such as asthma and unmet oral health needs; increasing rates of behavioral health challenges, such as anxiety, depression, and trauma; logistical barriers for families, such as insecure access to transportation that is and is perceived as safe and reliable, housing instability, and food insecurity; disengagement, and; punitive disciplinary responses.[6] Recent school-based health center analyses indicate that anxiety and depression are now leading health-related drivers of absence in many sites.[7]

Elevated absenteeism affects all groups but disproportionately burdens students in high-poverty schools and urban districts, English learners, students with disabilities, and youth experiencing homelessness[8]. In 2024–2025, nearly half of urban districts reported extreme chronic absence (≥30%), far higher than rural and suburban districts.[9]

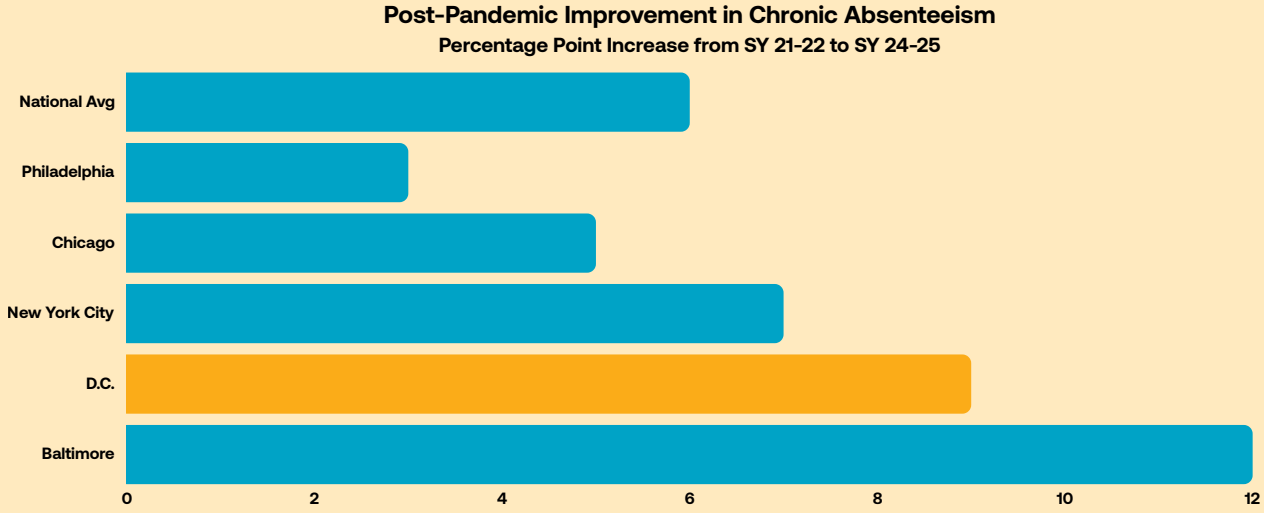
1: Allensworth, E. M., & Easton, J. Q. (2007). What matters for staying on-track and graduating in Chicago public high schools: A close look at course grades, failures, and attendance in the freshman year. Chicago, IL: Consortium on Chicago School Research; Gershenson, S., Jacknowitz, A., & Brannegan, A. (2017). Are student absences worth the worry in US primary schools? Education Finance and Policy, 12(2), 137-165.
2: Balfanz, R., & Byrnes, V. (2013). Meeting the challenge of combating chronic absenteeism: Impact of the NYC Mayor's Interagency Task Force on chronic absenteeism and school attendance and its implications for other cities. Everyone Graduates Center, Johns Hopkins University School of Education. Retrieved from: http://new.every1graduates.org/wp-ontent/uploads/2013/11/NYC-Chronic-Absenteeism-Impact-Report.pdf
3: Schoeneberger, J. (2012). Longitudinal attendance patterns: developing high school dropouts. The Clearinghouse: A Journal of Educational Strategies, Issues and Ideas, 85(1), 7-14; Byrnes, V., & Reyna, R. (2012). Summary of state level analysis of early warning indicators. Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University School of Education, Everyone Graduates Center.
4: Ready, D. (2010). Socioeconomic Disadvantage, School Attendance, and Early Cognitive Development: The Differential Effects of School Exposure. Sociology of Education, 83(4), 271-286.
5: Studies led by David Blazer, Tom Swiderski, and Mariana Barragan Torres as summarized in Malkus and Hollon "Absenteeism Is Up. Does It Matter as Much for Student Achievement?", American Enterprise Institute, Oct 2025.
6: Healthy Schools Campaign, 2024; U.S. Department of Education, 2025
7: Healthy Schools Campaign, 2024
8: Malkus, 2025; U.S. Department of Education, 2025
9: Diliberti et al., 2024; Diliberti et al., 2025

DC Chronic Absenteeism Rates in Context

Chronic absenteeism[1] rates nationally peaked in the '21-'22 school year at 29%, nearly double the pre-pandemic average of 15%.[10] DC followed this same trend, with chronic absenteeism rates jumping 18 percentage points in the 21-22 school year to 48% (vs 30% pre-pandemic.) This pandemic era increase in absenteeism was larger than the national average for urban districts, but on par with Chicago.[11]

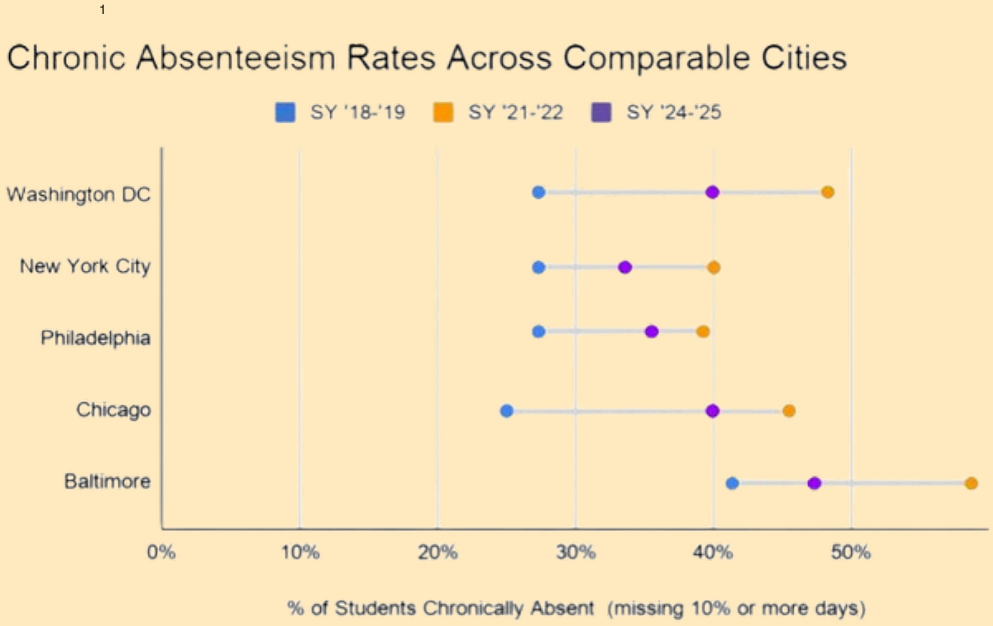


Since 2022, chronic absenteeism rates in DC improved significantly[12] by 9 percentage points to 39% in 2024, and were sustained[13] in 2025. Attendance remains strongly linked to academic growth. Notably, DC's 9 percentage point improvement from peak levels is larger than the national average and most comparable cities, with the exception of Baltimore.



10: National Return to Learn Tracker https://www.returntolearntracker.net/
11: Malkus, "Lingering Absence in Public Schools: Tracking Post-Pandemic Chronic Absenteeism into 2024", American Enterprise Institute, Jun 2025.
12: Forthcoming Every Day Counts Taskforce Report
13 PARCC, DC CAPE

The chart below presents a comprehensive view of how chronic absenteeism rates have shifted since 2019 across comparable cities.[14]



Attendance improvement in DC has come from all student demographic groups. Elementary schools have seen the greatest improvements in attendance, while chronic absence rates in high schools remain at critical levels (58%) and continue to be a focus for the Taskforce. Additional factors noted by Taskforce analysis of recent attendance data:

- Economically disadvantaged students are 3x more likely to be chronically absent than their peers
- Early dismissal days negatively impact attendance, yielding ~1.4 additional absences per student annually
- While high school attendance is low, attendance of students attending Advanced Technical Centers is ~7 pts higher than other high schools
- Chronic absenteeism in PreK is highly predictive of chronic absenteeism in Kindergarten, underscoring the importance of bridge supports

14: Chronic absenteeism data from the following sources: Return to Learn Tracker, https://infohub.nyced.org/reports/students-and-schools/school-quality/information-and-data-overview/end-of-year-attendance-and-chronic-absenteeism-data, https://www.illinoisreportcard.com/district.aspx?source=studentcharacteristics&source2=chronicabsenteeism&Districtid=15016299025, https://www.economyleague.org/resources/post-pandemic-attendance-philadelphia-schools, https://www.aei.org/research-products/report/lingering-absence-in-public-schools-tracking-post-pandemic-chronic-absenteeism-into-2024/

Approaches to Combating Chronic Absenteeism in DC

To successfully address[1] chronic absenteeism, DC has shifted focus from punitive measures to prevention and barrier closure. The Taskforce acts as a cross-agency platform, coordinating policies and strategies across multiple government sectors, including education, health, child welfare, transportation, safety, and justice. The goal of this coordination is to achieve shared accountability and focus attention on barriers and solutions, ensuring that attendance is treated as a vital sign of student and community well-being. The concerted efforts of the Taskforce, city agencies, schools, and community organizations have led to successful approaches that specifically prioritize supports for students and families. These supports aim to address the multifaceted drivers of absence, such as health conditions, behavioral health challenges, logistical barriers (transportation, housing instability), and disengagement, well before legal escalation becomes necessary. The city has put a number of promising programs into place:

DHS Truancy Reduction Pilot
The Department of Human Services (DHS) collaborates with schools to intervene early, contacting families at 15 full-day absences to identify barriers and connect them with resources before court involvement. This "resource first" design provides supports like attendance education, connections to housing and food resources, or enrollment in case management programs (either 90-day Brief Case Management or longer-term Parent and Adolescent Support Services Intensive Case Management). This approach is considered a best practice because early, supportive contact is more effective than escalation. 71% of the students served last year were not truant again this year.

CFSA Family Preservation Focus
The Child and Family Services Administration (CFSA) collaborates with DC Public Schools and the Public Charter School Board on attendance data through monthly coordination and virtual office hours. The agency's Thriving Families/Keeping DC Families Together initiative invests in primary prevention through Success Centers, Collaboratives, and a 211 Warm Line to reduce unnecessary child welfare involvement and remove stress and fear from the home environment. This operationalizes a family-preservation strategy that builds the conditions for consistent school routines.

EveryDay Labs
This program utilizes low-cost behavioral "nudges," such as adaptive text messaging and letters, as a form of family engagement. These communications reliably reduce absences by correcting misconceptions and activating family problem-solving, resulting in a 1.7 percentage point (or 6.3%) decrease in chronic absenteeism among the focus population in Washington, DC. These nudges meet families where they are and promote positive behavior change.

OSSE CTE and Advanced Technical Centers

The Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE) supports Career and Technical Education (CTE) pathways, such as the Advanced Technical Center (ATC), which offers citywide dual-credit pathways (e.g., cybersecurity, nursing) with transportation and paid internships. CTE participation correlates strongly with higher attendance and graduation, with ATC students showing approximately 7 percentage points higher in-seat attendance than similar peers. This relevance in coursework acts as a proven attendance driver.

OAG Restorative Practice and ATTEND

The Office of the Attorney General (OAG) prioritizes restorative practices and engagement programs that focus on relationship repair and belonging, which are crucial antidotes to community distress. RestorativeDC, a partner, supports over 60 schools and works with the OAG and DHS to offer restorative alternatives to prosecution. This collaborative effort by multiple agencies works to expand restorative capacity, especially in schools serving communities overrepresented in the criminal justice system.[3]

DDOT and WMATA Kids Ride Free (KRF)

KRF is foundational for mobility in DC, providing students with free Metrobus and Metrorail access, annual card distribution, and specific supports for students experiencing homelessness. A no-cost, reliable, and safe transit system is necessary for daily attendance, and continued investment includes efforts to expand the virtual card option and coordinate access for younger students.

DMPSJ Safe Passages and Walking School Bus

The Deputy Mayor for Public Safety and Justice (DMPSJ) runs the Safe Passage, Safe Blocks program, which deploys trained community ambassadors along arrival and dismissal routes to mediate conflict and build relationships. Evidence on Safe Routes-style efforts, including walking school buses used at several schools, shows that when these efforts are targeted to students with prior absences, they can lead to reductions in chronic absence, particularly where adult chaperones address safety perceptions.

OST Office and Community Based Partnership

The Out of School Time Office (OST) in the DME has provided over $140 million in awards since 2017 to fund out-of-school time programs for youth, citing evidence that OST participation correlates with higher attendance and achievement. Continued support for consistent OST funding and the quality infrastructure, like the MOST portal for simplified registration, is a high-leverage approach to increasing attendance.

Looking Forward

DC's success in outpacing peer cities is a strong indication that its coordinated approach to chronic absenteeism with a focus on prevention and addressing barriers is working. However, we are only halfway to achieving pre-pandemic chronic absenteeism rates; there is still much more work to do. We continue to provide more children with the school attendance they need to build a foundation for academic success.

Future work will also need to contend with significant structural pressures, such as reductions in DC revenue and services, rising regional unemployment, reductions in SNAP benefits and healthcare, and federal law enforcement strategies that can negatively impact attendance. To reduce chronic absenteeism by an additional 9 percentage points, the District must double down on investing in a coordinated system of strategies to support strong student attendance.

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