



## BEST PRACTICES IN HOMELESS EDUCATION BRIEF SERIES

### In School Every Day: Addressing Chronic Absenteeism Among Children and Youth Experiencing Homelessness

#### This NCHE brief

- provides an overview of the issue of chronic absenteeism,
- explains the effects of chronic absenteeism on school and student performance, and
- suggests strategies to address the issue of chronic absenteeism among children and youth experiencing homelessness.

## INTRODUCTION

The U.S. education system is founded on the idea that students are in class every weekday; simply put, to benefit from school, a student must be in attendance (U.S. Department of Education [ED], n.d.). Despite this, many students miss school on a regular basis, thus missing out on valuable instruction. Statistics on absenteeism among children and youth experiencing homelessness (CYEH) are particularly concerning, with federal data demonstrating that CYEH are chronically absent at a rate almost double that of the overall student population (National Center for Homeless Education [NCHE], 2024, p. 19). Missing school can have significant impacts, as research correlates chronic absenteeism with lower reading scores and high school graduation rates (ED, n.d.) and higher rates of grade retention and dropping out (Institute for Children, Poverty, & Homelessness [ICPH], 2015). Research and practice also demonstrate that efforts that lead to increased student attendance yield dividends in the form of greater student success in school (Chang et al., 2025). In fact,



#### THE MCKINNEY-VENTO HOMELESS ASSISTANCE ACT DEFINITION OF HOMELESS

(McKinney-Vento Act section 725(2))

The term "homeless children and youth"—

- A. means individuals who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence...; and
- B. includes –
  - i. children and youths who are sharing the housing of other persons due to loss of housing, economic hardship, or a similar reason; are living in motels, hotels, trailer parks, or camping grounds due to the lack of alternative adequate accommodations; are living in emergency or transitional shelters; or are abandoned in hospitals;
  - ii. children and youths who have a primary nighttime residence that is a public or private place not designed for or ordinarily used as a regular sleeping accommodation for human beings...;
  - iii. children and youths who are living in cars, parks, public spaces, abandoned buildings, substandard housing, bus or train stations, or similar settings; and
  - iv. migratory children...who qualify as homeless for the purposes of this subtitle because the children are living in circumstances described in clauses (i) through (iii).

researchers assert that one of the most effective strategies schools can employ to help students living in poverty perform better in school is to ensure these students attend school every day. This strategy alone, even without improvements in the American education system, will drive up achievement, high school graduation, and college attainment rates (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012, p. 4).

This brief explores the issue of chronic absenteeism among CYEH and suggests strategies to prevent and address this widespread issue. Briefs on additional homeless education topics are available for download on the [NCHE Resources webpage](#).

## UNDERSTANDING CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM

### THE DEFINITION

The U.S. Department of Education (ED) defines *chronic absenteeism* as missing 10% or more of the school year for any reason, whether excused or unexcused (ED, n.d.). Chronic absenteeism is not the same thing as truancy, which typically measures unexcused absences only and underestimates total absenteeism (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012, p. 7). Chronic absenteeism also differs from measures of attendance, which focus on students who are present in—rather than absent from—school, and may obscure troubling patterns of absenteeism among subsets of students (p. 3).

### COMMON CAUSES

While individual students may be absent from school for any number of reasons, common causes of absenteeism include

- **health issues**, including chronic and acute illness, as well as mental health challenges like depression and anxiety (Diliberti et al., 2025);
- **unmet basic needs**, including housing and food insecurity, as well as lack of access to reliable transportation, technology needed for schoolwork, and the wraparound services that might address these needs (Attendance Works, 2025a; ED, n.d.);
- **school disconnection**, including avoidance due to bullying, academic struggles, or school climate, as well as disengagement due to lack of stimulating instruction or meaningful connection with teachers or peers (Attendance Works, 2025a; ED, n.d.);
- **competing responsibilities**, including needing to care for a family member or attend work at a time that conflicts with the school day (Attendance Works, 2025a; Diliberti et al., 2025); and
- **misconceptions about the importance of school attendance**, including underestimating the negative effects of missing school or believing that absences are only an issue if they are unexcused (Attendance Works, 2025a; Diliberti et al., 2025).

## THE INCIDENCE AND PREVALENCE OF CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM

Despite the importance of regular school attendance, chronic absenteeism is surprisingly widespread. It is estimated that one in four U.S. students, or 28% of the student population, was chronically absent during the 2022–2023 school year (ED, n.d.). Missing school is also associated with poverty. Students from low-income families are more likely to be chronically absent than their higher-income peers (Black & Elgaddal, 2024, p. 1), while local educational agencies (LEAs, often referred to as *school districts*) with high levels of poverty are more likely to report more severe levels of chronic absenteeism (Diliberti et al., 2025).

Given the effects of housing instability on school attendance, it is not surprising that CYEH are even more likely to miss school than their housed, low-income peers. Data from the California Department of Education show that socioeconomically disadvantaged students were chronically absent at a rate of 21.7% in the 2024–25 school year, compared to 30.7% of CYEH (California Department of Education [CDE], 2025). Research on the relationship between school transfers and absenteeism is particularly relevant to highly mobile students, including CYEH. Data from the New York City Department of Education demonstrate a positive correlation between school moves, which are more frequent among CYEH, and missing school; simply put, the more times a student changes schools, the more likely the student is to be chronically absent (ICPH, 2015). Cross-sectional and longitudinal data from the Utah State Board of Education reinforce the relationship between school mobility and absenteeism, estimating that students who change schools one or more times during a school year are four times more likely to be chronically absent than students who do not change schools (Utah Education Policy Center [UEPC], 2012, p. 4).

In addition to being more likely for certain students, absenteeism is more likely during certain parts of a student’s K–12 educational career. Younger and older students tend to miss school the most (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012, p. 4), with rates of chronic absenteeism being higher in early elementary grades, decreasing during later elementary years, rising again in middle school, and reaching their highest level during high school (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012, p. 4; UEPC, 2012, p. 8).

Finally, research indicates that chronic absenteeism is not distributed evenly across all schools but rather is clustered in a subset of schools. In fact, half of the nation’s chronically absent students are concentrated in just 6% (1,000) of LEAs, which are located in every state. The remaining half of the nation’s chronically absent students are spread across the other 94% (16,000) of LEAs. (Balfanz, 2024, p. 3).

Information about where, when, and for whom chronic absenteeism is most likely to occur can help states and LEAs target efforts and interventions to the students and schools where they are most needed.

## EFFECTS OF CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM ON STUDENT AND SCHOOL PERFORMANCE

### STUDENT PERFORMANCE

As mentioned, missing school impacts overall student performance, with chronically absent students exhibiting lower reading scores, lower high school graduation rates, and higher rates of grade retention and dropping out. Data from the New York City Department of Education found the following specific effects on CYEH:

- Chronically absent elementary students experiencing homelessness repeated the same grade at over three times the rate of students experiencing homelessness who missed fewer than five days of school (ICPH, 2015, p. 1).
- Elementary students experiencing homelessness who missed fewer than five school days passed State assessment tests at approximately the same rate as their low-income housed classmates (38% compared to 37%), while only 12% of chronically absent elementary students experiencing homelessness achieved proficiency on state assessment tests (p. 1).

These statistics suggest that lower standardized test scores and higher rates of grade retention cannot be attributed to homelessness alone; rather, chronic absenteeism intensifies the educational challenges experienced by CYEH.

In the long term, chronic absenteeism is linked with negative outcomes over the course of a student's life, including a decreased likelihood of enrollment in a post-secondary education program (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012, pp. 27-28; Coffin & Mason, 2025, p. 4), as well as substantial adverse outcomes across economic, occupational, and health-related domains (Kearney, 2025, p. 1).

### SCHOOL PERFORMANCE

Because data used to evaluate school and LEA performance are an aggregate measure of the combined performance of individual students, it follows that chronic absenteeism affects not only student performance, but also that of broader school systems. Research shows that high rates of chronic absenteeism among elementary students have academic consequences for all students in the school, not just those who are chronically absent. Irregular student attendance makes it harder for teachers to maintain classroom norms and instructional pace, leaving peers waiting for absent classmates to catch up (May et al., 2025). Under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), as amended, state accountability systems must include student proficiency rates on state assessment tests and graduation rates for high schools (Section 1111(c)). Furthermore, starting with the 2017-18 school year, state report cards were required to begin disaggregating data on student achievement on state assessment tests and high school graduation rates by homeless status (ESEA section 1111(h))

(1)(C)). Additionally, beginning with the 2016-17 school year, states began reporting rates of chronic absenteeism among their student populations disaggregated by race, disability status, Limited English Proficiency (LEP) status, and homeless status (ED, 2025, pp. 3-4).

While data on absenteeism and attendance measure different things, the former is inextricably linked with the latter, with ramifications for LEA funding, as LEAs in at least six states—including California and Texas—are awarded state education funds based on student attendance data (Superville, 2024). As such, LEA efforts that succeed in reducing student absenteeism will yield positive results not only in student achievement gains but also may result in increased funding. For example, the Coeur d’Alene School District (ID) estimated forfeiting \$4.8 million in state education funding due to absenteeism in the 2024-25 school year (Hocker, 2025). The El Paso Independent School District (TX) and Oakland Unified School District (CA) estimated losing \$3.25 million and \$55 million in state education funding, respectively, during the 2023-24 school year as a result of absenteeism (Silva, 2024; Gunderson et al., 2025).

## **STRATEGIES FOR PREVENTING AND ADDRESSING CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM**

Given the effect of chronic absenteeism on student and, by extension, LEA performance and funding, schools cannot afford to overlook this issue. Fortunately, schools are not without recourse. Consider the following strategies for preventing and addressing chronic absenteeism.

### **DATA COLLECTION AND ANALYSIS**

An effective response to chronic absenteeism begins with robust data collection and analysis. Best practices for leveraging data to address chronic absenteeism include

- monitoring chronic absenteeism data regularly to identify which students need early intervention and which schools may need targeted support due to high absenteeism levels (Attendance Works, 2025b);
- identifying the root causes of absences based on insights from student and parent engagement, as well as considering the support needed to address these causes (Attendance Works, 2025b);
- reviewing available school and community resources to address attendance barriers, as well as providing comprehensive assistance for vulnerable students (Attendance Works, 2025b); and
- connecting with families through supportive and personalized communication rather than adopting a punitive approach (Attendance Works, 2025b).

LEAs can access chronic absenteeism data on CYEH by [contacting their state coordinator for homeless education](#). LEAs can also consult SchoolHouse Connection's [Child and Youth Homelessness Data Profiles](#) (select options such as *state*, *county*, and *school district* to access data at the desired level).

## STUDENT-LEVEL INTERVENTIONS

Informed by data, schools can consider a variety of student- and family-level interventions to support regular school attendance, including

- pairing at-risk students with mentors who encourage them to attend school every day, and provide accountability through attendance monitoring and follow-up when students miss school (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012, p. 35); and
- following up promptly with parents whose children miss school to understand what caused the absence and how that barrier might be overcome (ICPH, 2015, p. 7).

Visit [Attendance Works' Chronic Absence: 3 Tiers of Intervention webpage](#) to learn more about useful practices for addressing chronic absenteeism using a multitiered support approach.

## LEA-LEVEL STRATEGIES

LEAs and states can also encourage regular school attendance by

- offering before- and after-school activities that increase students' desire to attend school (ICPH, 2015, p. 7),
- incentivizing school attendance by rewarding students who have excellent attendance records (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012, p. 34),
- providing school-based dental and health services for students who may not have access to these services outside of school (Chang & Jordan, 2015, p. 2), and
- revising policies that may inadvertently decrease student attendance by establishing severe penalties for tardiness (UEPC, 2012, p. 14) and/or suspending students from school because of excessive absences (Chang & Jordan, 2015, p. 1).

## COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIP

LEAs also can leverage community support through partnerships with local agencies, including

- **Homeless shelters:** Shelters can partner with schools in support of CYEH by providing a space for students to do homework and encouraging families to send their children to school every day (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012, p. 35; ICPH, 2015, p. 7).

- **Social services:** Local social service agencies can support school attendance by encouraging families who receive public benefits to send their children to school every day. For example, one Colorado community incorporated regular school attendance into its Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) personal responsibility contract, referring families to a local nonprofit organization to help overcome barriers to attendance. These barriers can range from parents' late work hours to the student's lack of an alarm clock or clean clothes (National Forum on Education Statistics [NFES], 2009, p. 21).
- **Local public transit and media:** Communities such as New York City have partnered with the local public transit authority and media through public relations campaigns, including automated phone calls to student homes from celebrities encouraging regular school attendance, as well as signs on subways and busses reminding parents about the importance of their children being in school every day (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012, p. 35).

## FEDERAL SUPPORTS

The U.S. Department of Education encourages schools to focus on the issue of chronic absenteeism among students, including CYEH, in a variety of ways, such as

- monitoring implementation of the education subtitle of the [McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act](#), which requires states and LEAs to remove barriers to school attendance and promote school stability for CYEH (Section 721(2));
- requiring schools to report annually on chronic absenteeism among CYEH (ED, 2025, pp. 3-4); and
- supporting the [Student Engagement and Attendance Technical Assistance Center \(SEAC\)](#), which helps states and LEAs combat chronic absenteeism by boosting student engagement, offering resources, and sharing best practices.

LEAs that implement a multilayered approach to addressing the issue of student absenteeism are likely to see the most success in improving student attendance. Through targeted and committed efforts to engage with students, parents, and community partners, and implement LEA-level policies and practices that encourage regular attendance, schools can help reduce levels of chronic absenteeism and improve outcomes for students in school and over the course of their lifetimes.

## ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

Visit the following websites for more information on understanding and addressing chronic absenteeism:

- [Attendance Works: Advancing Student Success by Reducing Chronic Absence](#)
- [SchoolHouse Connection: Chronic Absence & Homelessness](#)
- [U.S. Department of Education: Chronic Absenteeism: Supporting Student Attendance and Combatting Chronic Absenteeism in our Nation's Schools](#)
- [U.S. Department of Education: Student Engagement and Attendance Technical Assistance Center \(SEAC\)](#)

## REFERENCES

- Attendance Works. (2025a). *Chronic absence: Identify the root causes of absence*. <https://www.attendanceworks.org/chronic-absence/addressing-chronic-absence/3-tiers-of-intervention/root-causes/>
- Attendance Works. (2025b). *Toolkits: Use data for intervention and support*. <https://www.attendanceworks.org/resources/toolkits/teaching-attendance-2-0/use-data-for-intervention-and-support/>
- Balfanz, R. (2024). *Meeting the chronic absenteeism challenge: What do we know? The Grad Partnership*. <https://www.gradpartnership.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/EGC-GP-NPSS-May-2024-Brief.pdf>
- Balfanz, R., & Byrnes, V. (2012). *The importance of being in school: A report on absenteeism in the nation's public schools*. [http://new.every1graduates.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/FINALChronicAbsenteeismReport\\_May16.pdf](http://new.every1graduates.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/05/FINALChronicAbsenteeismReport_May16.pdf)
- Black, L., & Elgaddal, N. (2024). *Chronic school absenteeism for health-related reasons among children ages 5-17 years: United States, 2022*. CDC. <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/databriefs/db498.pdf>
- California Department of Education [CDE]. (2025). *Academic engagement: Chronic absenteeism. California School Dashboard*. <https://www.caschooldashboard.org/reports/ca/2025/academic-engagement#chronic-absenteeism>
- Chang, H., Balfanz, R., & Byrnes, V. (2025). *Continued high levels of chronic absence, with some improvements, require action*. Attendance Works. <https://www.attendanceworks.org/continued-high-levels-of-chronic-absence-with-some-improvements-require-action/>
- Chang, H., & Jordan, P. (2015). *Mapping the early attendance gap: Charting a course for school success*. Attendance Works. [https://www.attendanceworks.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/Mapping-the-Early-Attendance-Gap\\_Final-4.pdf](https://www.attendanceworks.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/Mapping-the-Early-Attendance-Gap_Final-4.pdf)
- Coffin, C., & Mason, H. (2025). *Chronic absenteeism as a barrier to college and career readiness in D.C.* D.C. Policy Center. [https://www.dcpolicycenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/chronic-absenteeism\\_july\\_2025-1.pdf](https://www.dcpolicycenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/07/chronic-absenteeism_july_2025-1.pdf)

- Diliberti, M., Chu, L., Rainey, L., DiNicola, S., Lake, R., & Schwartz, H. (2025). *Chronic absenteeism still a struggle in 2024-2025*. RAND. [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RRA956-34.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA956-34.html)
- Elementary and Secondary Education Act, as amended by the Every Student Succeeds Act, 20 U.S.C. § 6301 et seq. <http://uscode.house.gov/view.xhtml?path=/prelim@title20/chapter70&edition=prelim>
- Hocker, S. (2025, October 25). Absenteeism has a cost—for students and for schools. *Coeur d'Alene Press*. <https://cdapress.com/news/2025/oct/25/absenteeism-has-a-cost-for-students-and-for-schools/>
- Institute for Children, Poverty, & Homelessness [ICPH]. (2015). *Empty seats: The epidemic of absenteeism among homeless elementary students*. <https://www.icph.org/reports/empty-seats-the-epidemic-of-absenteeism-among-homeless-elementary-students/>
- Kearney, C. A. (2025). Framing chronic absenteeism and emotionally-based school absenteeism as public health problems. *Frontiers in Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, 4. <https://doi.org/10.3389/frcha.2025.1662093>
- May, H., Bailes, L., & Riser, D. (2025). Absenteeism and achievement in early elementary grades: A multilevel organizational analysis. *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk (JESPAR)*, 30(4), 311–336. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10824669.2024.2413483>
- McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act, Subtitle VII-B, 42 U.S.C § 11431 et seq. (2015). <http://uscode.house.gov/view.xhtml?path=/prelim@title42/chapter119/subchapter6/partB&edition=prelim>
- National Center for Homeless Education [NCHE]. (2024). *Student homelessness in America: School years 2020-21 to 2022-23*. <https://www.ed.gov/media/document/student-homelessness-america-school-years-2020-21-2022-23-108414.pdf>
- National Forum on Education Statistics [NFES]. (2009). *Every school day counts: The forum guide to collecting and using attendance data*. <https://nces.ed.gov/pubs2009/2009804.pdf>
- Silva, C. (2024, August 13). *EPISD loses \$3.25 million due to absences, poor attendance reporting*. *El Paso Matters*. <https://elpasomatters.org/2024/08/13/epis-d-attendance-audit-state-funding-truancy-absences/>
- Superville, D. (2024, May 13). *Why chronic absenteeism is a budget problem, too*. *Education Week*. <https://www.edweek.org/leadership/why-chronic-absenteeism-is-a-budget-problem-too/2024/05>
- U.S. Department of Education [ED]. (n.d.). *Chronic absenteeism: Supporting student attendance and combatting chronic absenteeism in our nation's schools*. <https://www.ed.gov/teaching-and-administration/supporting-students/chronic-absenteeism>
- U.S. Department of Education [ED]. (2025). *FS195 - Chronic absenteeism file specifications*. <https://www.ed.gov/media/document/edpass-fs195-21-1-110105.docx>
- Utah Education Policy Center [UEPC]. (2012). *Research brief: Chronic absenteeism*. <https://uepc.utah.edu/resources/documents/chronicabsenteeismresearchbrief.pdf>

**This brief was developed by**

**The National Center for Homeless Education**

**305-306-8495 | [NCHE.help@safalpartners.com](mailto:NCHE.help@safalpartners.com) | <http://nche.ed.gov>**

Updated January 2026

The National Center for Homeless Education (NCHE) is the technical assistance (TA) center for the U.S. Department of Education’s Education for Homeless Children and Youths (EHCY) Program. NCHE provides training and technical assistance to state coordinators, local liaisons, community partners, parents, students, and other stakeholders to support the education of children and youth experiencing homelessness.

This publication was created in whole or in part with funding from the U.S. Department of Education under contract number GS10F090CA. The views expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the position or policies of the U.S. Department of Education. Additionally, any mention of trade names, commercial products, or organizations does not imply endorsement by the federal government.



Every state is required to have a state coordinator for homeless education, and every school district is required to have a local homeless education liaison. These individuals oversee the implementation of the McKinney-Vento Act. To find out who your state coordinator is, visit the [NCHE website](#).

For more information on issues related to the education of children and youth experiencing homelessness, contact the NCHE helpline at 305-306-8495 or NCHE. [NCHE.help@safalpartners.com](mailto:NCHE.help@safalpartners.com).

Full Name:

Position/Title:

Email:

Phone Number: