



## Missing Too Much School

—  
Trends in K-8 Chronic Absenteeism  
in Arizona During the Pandemic

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## About Helios Education Foundation

Helios Education Foundation is dedicated to enriching the lives of individuals in both Arizona and Florida by creating opportunities for success in postsecondary education. Fundamental beliefs in Community, Equity, Investment, and Partnership propel student supports and guide the foundation's strategic investments. While all students benefit from the transformational power of education, Helios focuses on serving first-generation, low-income, and underrepresented students, thus addressing the education equity gap that often prevents these students from realizing their potential.

## About WestEd

WestEd is a nonpartisan, nonprofit research, development, and service agency that partners with education and other communities throughout the United States and abroad to promote excellence, achieve equity, and improve learning for children, youth, and adults. WestEd has more than a dozen offices nationwide. More information about WestEd is available at WestEd.org.

## Dear Education Partner,

Among the many disruptions to learning that the pandemic has caused for students and families in Arizona, lost instructional time stands out as one of the most consequential. For a wide range of reasons—related to factors like quarantine, family health and finances, changing schools—students in Arizona are missing too much school.

This was true before the pandemic, but, as this brief shows, the chronic absence rate spiked in 2021 compared to pre-pandemic school years. Nearly one in five students missed more than 10 percent of the school year.

Chronic absenteeism is linked with diminished learning outcomes and an increased likelihood of negative outcomes, like dropping out of high school, that can divert students from paths to postsecondary and professional success.

By highlighting statewide trends in chronic absenteeism during the pandemic, this brief gives education leaders and policymakers an important benchmark that can inform decision making about attendance tracking and attendance improvement efforts.

It also serves as a stark reminder that chronic absence undermines efforts to increase educational equity for students from populations historically underserved and marginalized in our school system. Considering the significant increases in chronic absence observed among these populations during the pandemic, it is vital that we find ways to improve support and engage students to improve attendance as the foundation of a broader approach to increasing equity and closing achievement and opportunity gaps.

Sincerely,



Vince Roig  
Founding Chairman



Paul J. Luna  
President & CEO

## Introduction

The negative short and long-term effects of missing too much school are numerous and significant. Chronic absence—defined in Arizona as missing 10 percent or more of the school year while enrolled at the same school—causes students to miss vital instructional time, and is linked to decreased academic achievement, at all grade levels, subsequent absenteeism in later grades, lower graduation rates, and increased likelihood of dropping out of school.<sup>1</sup>

Chronic absence also impedes efforts to narrow persistent achievement gaps in Arizona. As the study on which this brief is based shows, students who are economically disadvantaged, American Indian/Alaskan Native, and students in special education were chronically absent at disproportionate rates before the pandemic. During the pandemic, rates of chronic absence for these student populations have increased strikingly in Arizona. Notably, pre-pandemic, English learners, Black/African American students, and Hispanic/Latino students did not have higher rates of chronic absence; however, this changed during the pandemic and students in these groups were more strongly impacted than their peers.

Amid ongoing efforts to accelerate the recovery from the most acute pandemic disruptions to public education in the state, the education community and policymakers in Arizona need to better understand how the pandemic impacted school attendance, as well as the implications of those impacts for increasing educational equity in the state.

<sup>1</sup> Chang, H.N., et al. (2019). "Using Chronic Absence Data to Improve Conditions for Learning." Attendance Works and American Institutes for Research (AIR). [https://www.attendanceworks.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Attendance\\_Works\\_Using\\_Chronic\\_Absence\\_\\_091619.pdf](https://www.attendanceworks.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/Attendance_Works_Using_Chronic_Absence__091619.pdf)

Marsh, V.L. (2019). "Understanding Chronic Absenteeism: What Research Tells Us about Poor Attendance at School." American Educator, Winter 2019–2020. <https://www.aft.org/ae/winter2019-2020/marsh>



### About This Brief

This brief highlights select findings from a study developed by WestEd and Helios Education Foundation to investigate K–8 trends in student attendance and chronic absence before and during the pandemic (2017 to 2021). The data for the study came from Arizona Department of Education sources such as the Department’s longitudinal and school finance data systems. The study population consisted of all K–8 students enrolled in an Arizona public school and present in each October school census. Descriptive statistics from 2017 to 2021 were calculated to report on the trends in chronic absence.

To access the full report from the study, a detailed description of the data and methodology, and additional analyses from the study not included in this brief, please visit: [https://www.helios.org/media/zeckn0xp/brief-az-chronic-absence-report-final-draft\\_with-appendix\\_proofed.pdf](https://www.helios.org/media/zeckn0xp/brief-az-chronic-absence-report-final-draft_with-appendix_proofed.pdf)

## An Overview of Chronic Absence in Arizona During the Pandemic

In the three school years leading up to the pandemic, the annual chronic absence rate in Arizona held relatively steady in the 12 to 14 percent range, with approximately 100,000 students across the state identified as chronically absent each year. Midway through the 2020 school year, with the pandemic leading to school closures and the transition to online schooling, Arizona schools were directed to cease attendance reporting temporarily.<sup>2</sup> A result of this change in reporting was an anomalous decrease (to nine percent) in the reported chronic absence rate statewide for 2020.

However, when attendance tracking and reporting resumed in the 2021 school year, the chronic absence rate shot up to 22 percent. **Compared to 2019, this amounts to a 57 percent increase.** Approximately 163,000 students were chronically absent in 2021. The increases during this period were the sharpest for students who are economically disadvantaged, English learners, American Indian/Alaskan Native, Black/African American, and Hispanic/Latino.

### Accounting for Student Mobility

In Arizona, chronic absence is officially defined as missing 10 percent or more of the school year, for any reason, while enrolled at a given school. In a typical 180-day school year, this is equivalent to 18 days missed.

However, annual chronic absence rates based on the official state definition do not fully account for student mobility or capture all students who miss more than 10 percent of the school year. Students who miss 18 days or more during the school year, but who attend more than one school (for example, if a student misses 10 days at one school and 10 days at a second school) may not be counted as chronically absent.



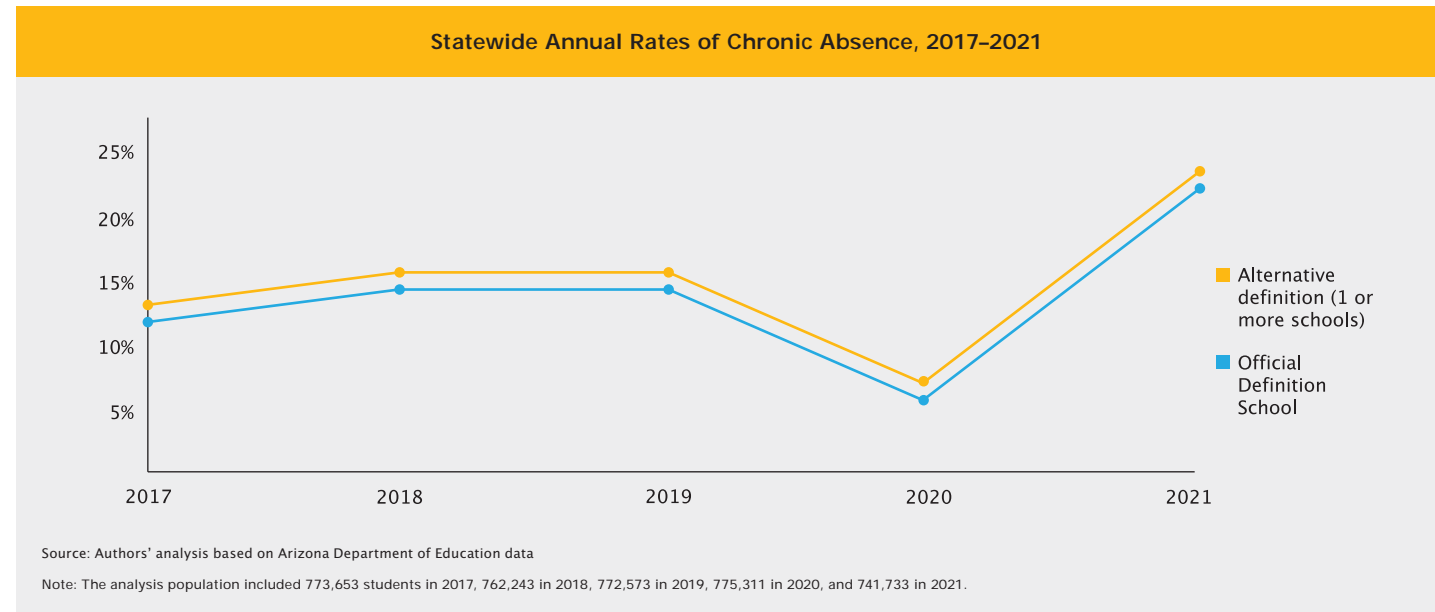
<sup>2</sup> See (Brick & Mortar (B&M) General Information and Attendance): <https://www.azed.gov/finance/school-finance-guidance-for-covid-19/>

### Student Mobility During the Pandemic

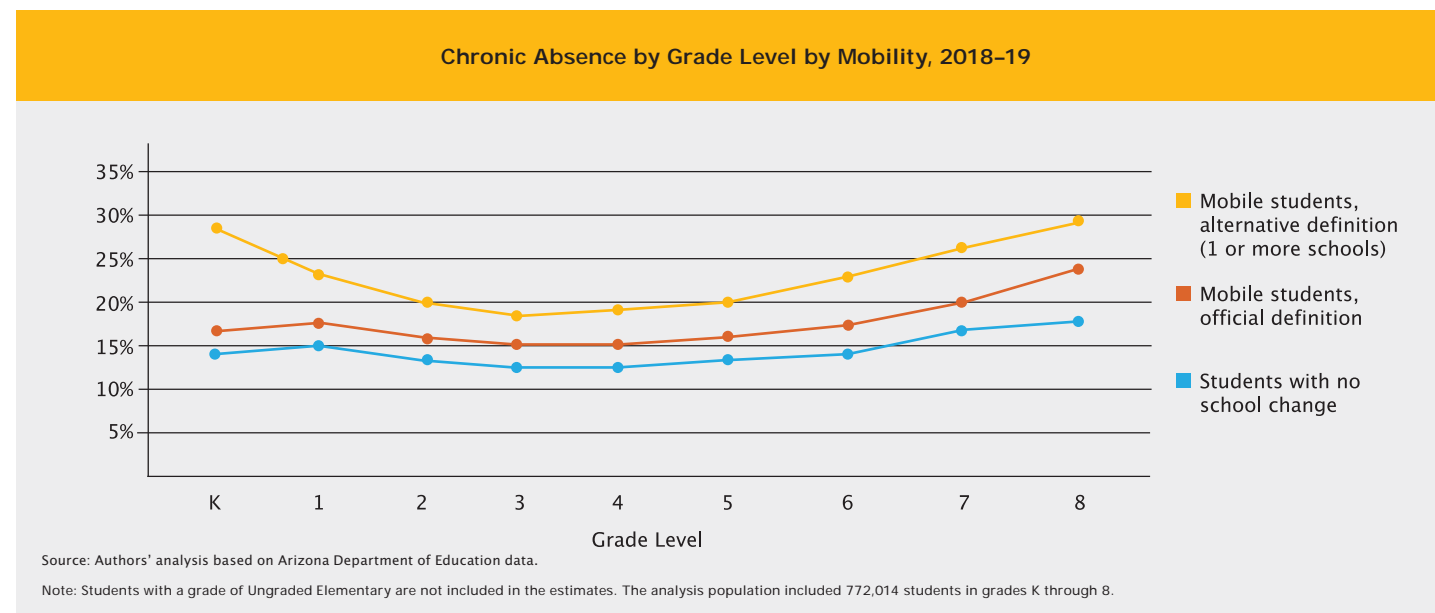
Arizona Department of Education enrollment and withdrawal data indicate that during the 2020–2021 school year, students in Arizona were more mobile than they were in the previous two years. This is especially true for students in the elementary grade levels, who were more likely to withdraw or transfer to another school than students in older grades. This increase in mobility was accompanied by a notable decrease in enrollment statewide.

To learn more about the impacts of the pandemic on enrollment and mobility, please see: <https://www.azed.gov/accountability-research/data> (COVID-19 Impact Reporting) and <https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/rel/Products/Resource/100580>.

Defining chronic absence in terms of total days missed during a given year—regardless of whether a student attended one school or multiple schools—can help to identify students who are effectively chronically absent but who might not otherwise be identified as such. Using 18 or more total days absent as the threshold (again, this corresponds to 10 percent of a 180-day school year), approximately 7,000 additional students were identified as chronically absent during the 2021 school year. This alternative definition suggests Arizona’s actual chronic absence rate is a full percentage point higher than the official rate.



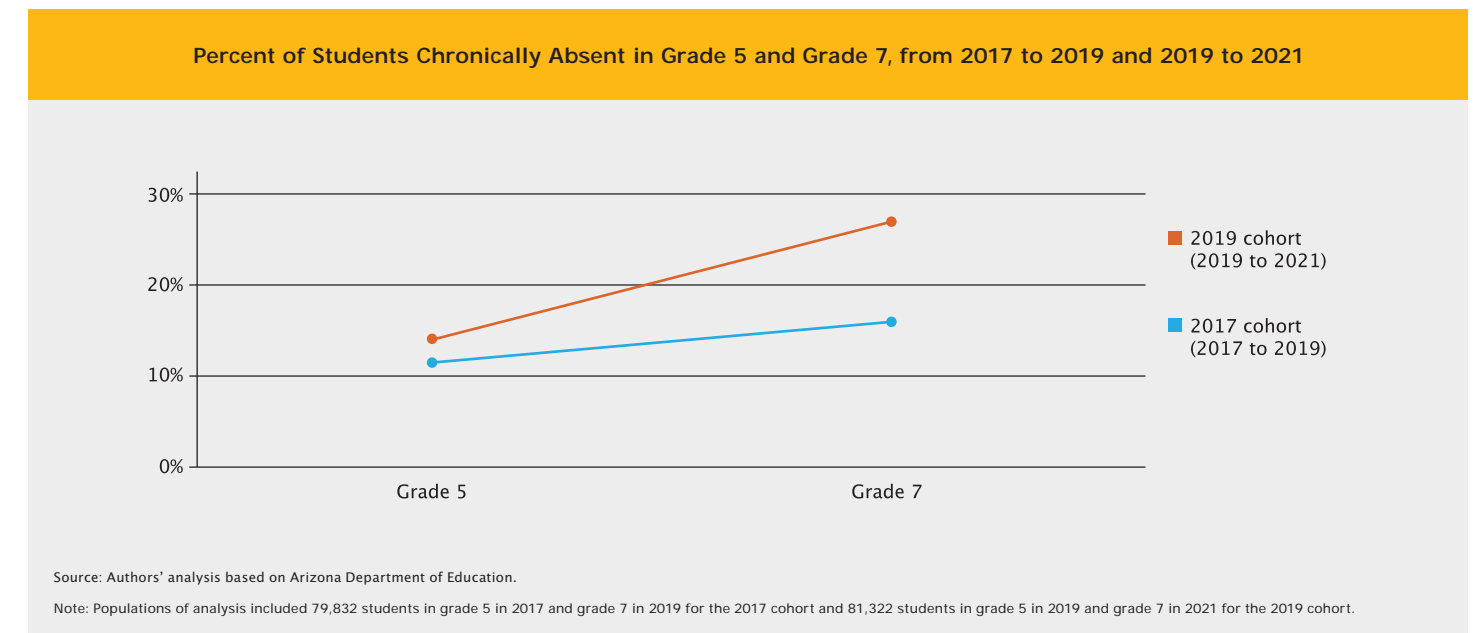
Accounting for absences across any school of enrollment during the school year significantly increased the chronic absence rates of mobile students, defined as those who changed school at least once during the school year. Data from the 2018-2019 school year exemplify this; again, using the 18 or more total days absent (across all schools of enrollment) as the threshold, chronic absence rates for mobile students increased by approximately five percentage points, reaching a high of 29 percent for these students in grade 8.



### Grade-Level Cohort Comparison of Chronic Absence

In 2021, 22 percent of students in grades K-8 were chronically absent. An analysis of two comparable cohorts further illustrates how the pandemic shifted chronic absence rates and which students were most impacted. A comparison of the cohort progressing from grade 5 in 2017 to grade 7 in 2019 (2017 cohort) and the cohort progressing from grade 5 in 2019 to grade 7 in 2021 (2019 cohort) shows that while chronic absence rates increased by five percentage points from grade 5 to grade 7 for students in the 2017 cohort, they doubled for the 2019 cohort, which experienced the pandemic disruption in those same grades.

The overall chronic absence rate for grade 5 students in 2017 was 11 percent, and it increased to 16 percent when those students reached grade 7 in 2019. In contrast, the chronic absence rate for grade 5 students increased from 13 percent in 2019 to 26 percent in 2021 when those students reached grade 7, revealing a steeper increase during the pandemic.

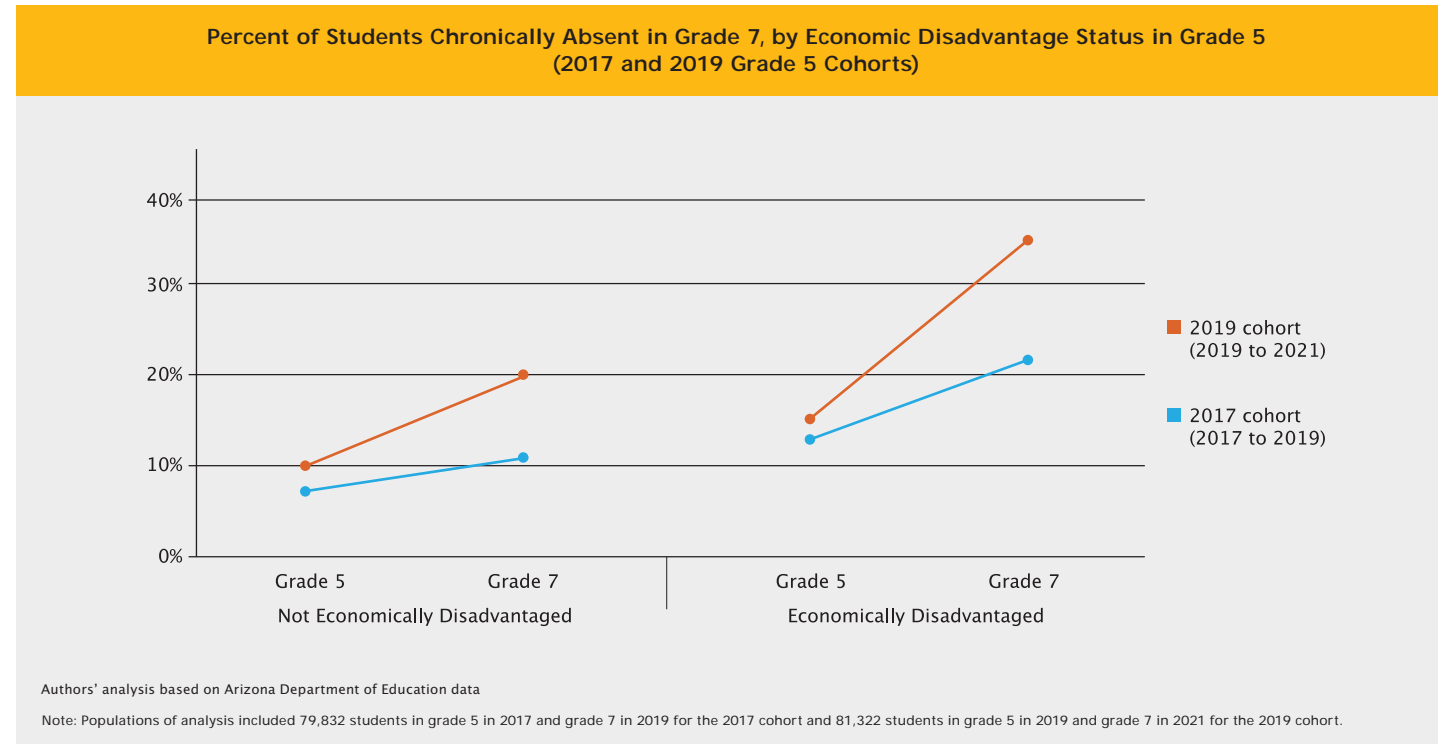


Moreover, chronic absence in grade 5 was highly predictive of chronic absence in grade 7. More than half of the students in both the 2017 cohort and the 2019 cohort who were chronically absent in grade 5 were also chronically absent in grade 7. This correlation was consistent in the years preceding the pandemic as well as during pandemic, suggesting that chronic absence in grade 5 is an important risk factor for chronic absence in grade 7.

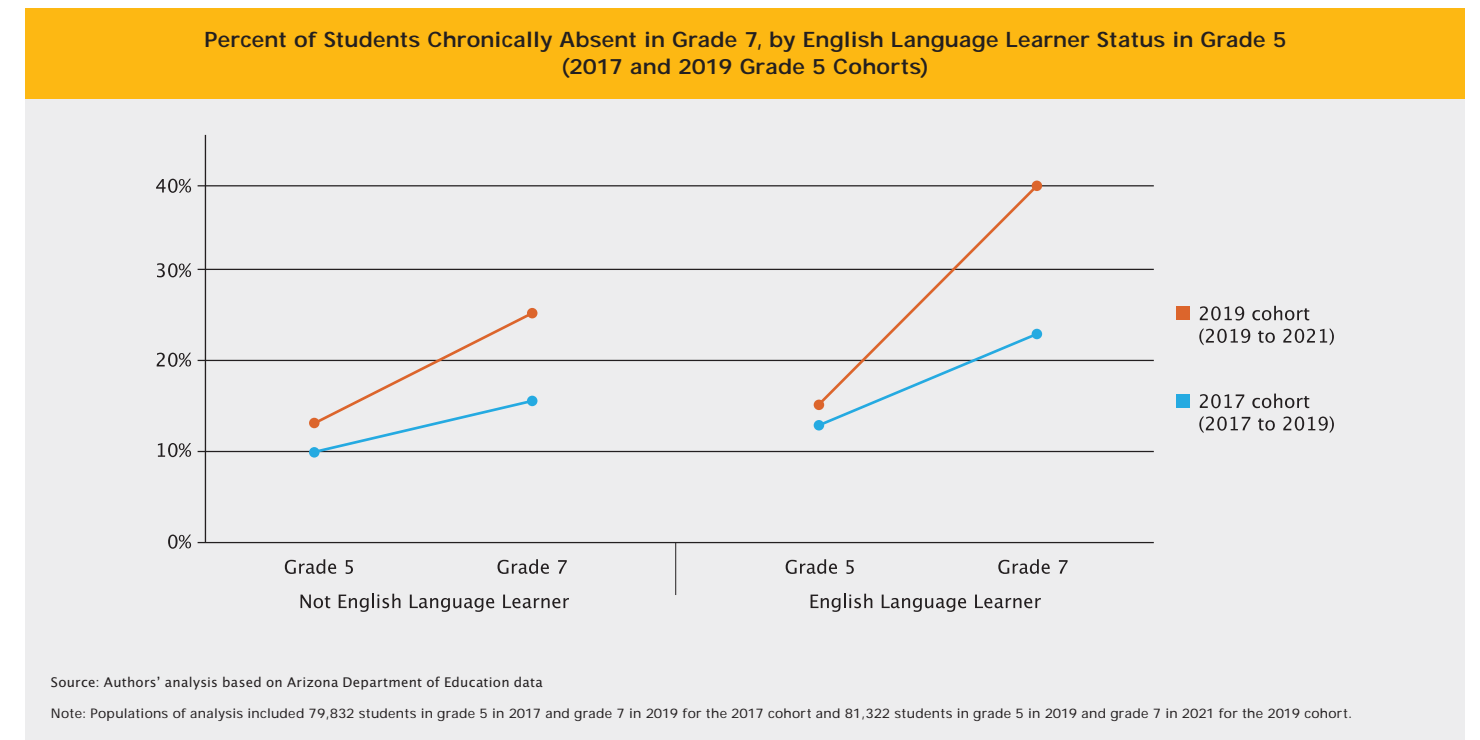
## Increased Chronic Absence Among Vulnerable Student Populations

Chronic absence increased for all student groups with the pandemic. However, students classified as economically disadvantaged, English language learner students, American Indian or Alaska Native students, Black/African American students, and Hispanic students were more strongly impacted than their peers.

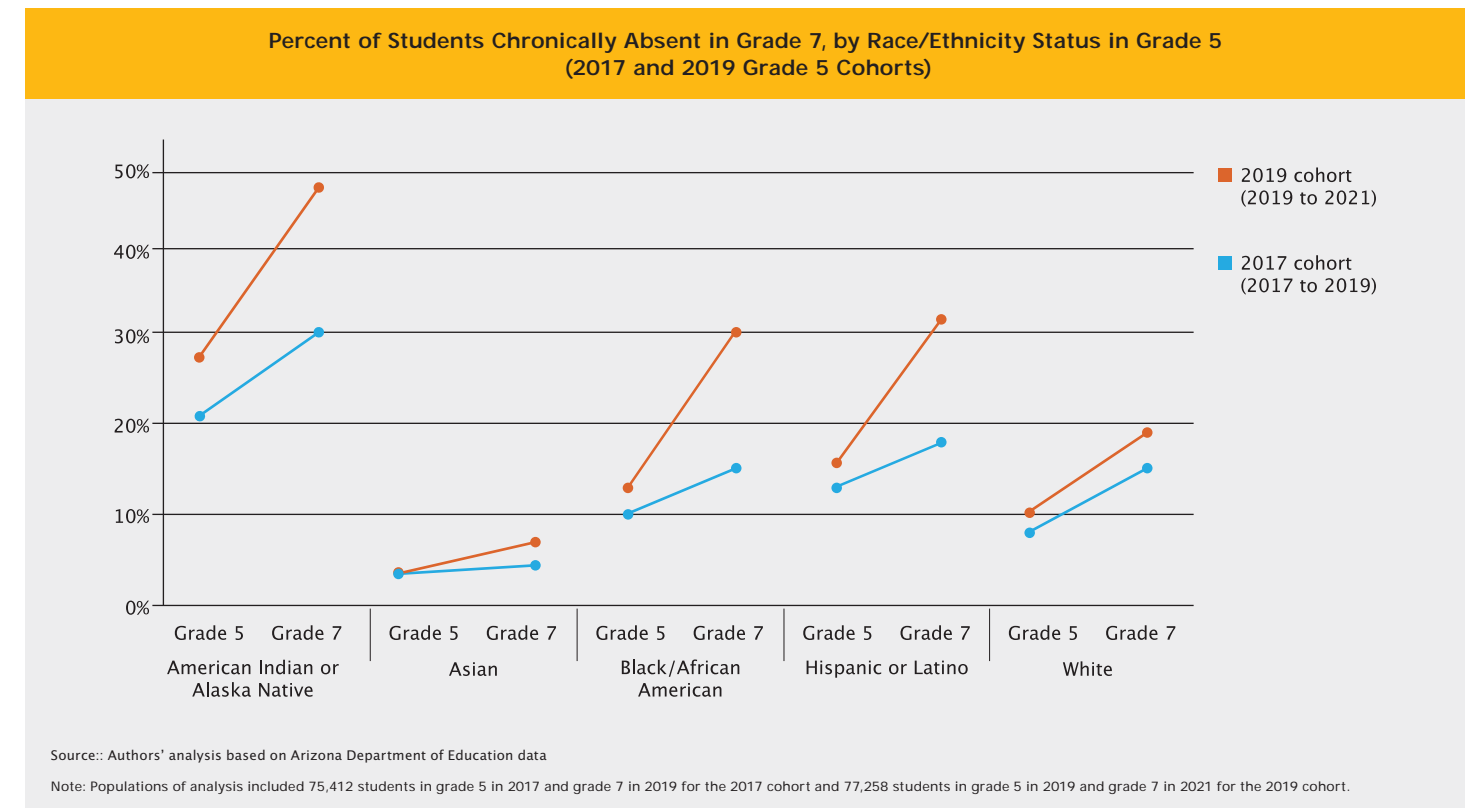
For the 2017 cohort, chronic absence rates increased from 13 percent in grade 5 to 21 percent in grade 7 for students classified as economically disadvantaged. By comparison, before the pandemic, the rate of chronic absence among students not classified as economically disadvantaged rose from 8 percent in grade 5 to 12 percent in grade 7. For the 2019 cohort, the increase in chronic absence rates was greater for both groups, with a notably steeper increase for economically disadvantaged students.



Similarly, the rates of chronic absence among English language learner students increased more sharply than for their non-English learner peers during the pandemic. For the 2019 cohort, chronic absence rates increased more than threefold for English language learner students, climbing from 15 percent in grade 5 to 40 percent in grade 7. Chronic absence rates also increased sharply for the 2019 cohort of students in grade 5 not classified as English language learner students, doubling from 12 percent in grade 5 to 25 percent in grade 7.



Chronic absence rates increased for all racial/ethnic groups during the pandemic, but some groups in grade 5 in the 2019 cohort experienced particularly sharp spikes by grade 7 in 2021. Rate increases were sharpest for American Indian or Alaska Native students (24 percent in grade 5 to 48 percent in grade 7), Black/African American students (12 percent in grade 5 to 30 percent in grade 7), and Hispanic or Latino students (13 percent in grade 5 to 31 percent in grade 7).



## A Call to Action

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The findings discussed in this brief—and in the complete study report on which it is based—provide vital insights that can aid in the of planning efforts to improve attendance, both locally and statewide. They provide a preliminary understanding of which student groups have been impacted the most by disrupted learning and lost instructional time during the pandemic. They also represent a baseline and a benchmark to make well-informed decisions with respect to practical and effective attendance interventions and progress monitoring once those interventions are implemented.

Pandemic-related disruptions in schooling continue to result in students missing amounts of school and instructional time that put their learning and futures at risk. Reducing the chronic absence rate statewide should be among the foremost goals for education leaders and policymakers as they continue to develop immediate and multi-year approaches to pandemic recovery. After all, school attendance is the prerequisite on which other crucial efforts—such as those to close achievement gaps, expand learning opportunities and to increase educational equity—are built.

The state should consider adjusting how chronic absence is defined to help local education agencies (LEAs) identify and support mobile students who are at risk of becoming chronically absent. The current definition does not accurately reflect chronic absenteeism among students who change schools. With increased student mobility during the pandemic, the current definition of a chronically absent student may need to be revisited.

Additionally, the state can support LEAs in identifying evidence-based interventions to address chronic absenteeism, especially for student groups who have experienced steep increases in chronic absence. The pandemic exacerbated chronic absence for some groups, including economically disadvantaged students, English learners, American Indian students, Black/African American students, and Hispanic/Latino students. The Arizona Department of Education (ADE) could consider providing supports to help LEAs target attendance and engagement support to the groups who have been most impacted. There is also an opportunity to study which supports are working well for which student groups.

Finally, future research can examine how the pandemic effected chronic absence and dropout rates in high school. Doing so would help to increase understanding of the overarching affect the pandemic has had on attendance throughout the K-12 continuum. It could also help to identify where targeted interventions and supports for high school students might be appropriate or necessary. Another opportunity for future research is to examine specific factors—such as access to child care and early childhood education—that may have contributed to increased chronic absence rates across the K-12 continuum during the pandemic.



