



PRESS RELEASE

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New Analysis: Chronic Absence Rates in California Shed Light on National Trends

February 24, 2026 – Analyzing data from the California Department of Education, three research briefs released today offer new insights into absenteeism trends and the types of investments needed to reduce the alarmingly high levels of chronic absence. Since California’s 5.8 million public school students make up over 12% of all students nationwide, these trends offer a window into what is needed to improve student outcomes across the nation.

The briefs indicate where lack of access to learning opportunities are most problematic, and shed light on where partnerships with families, educators, policy makers and communities are essential to improve student engagement and attendance, starting with our youngest students.

“Today, like most states in the nation, the decrease in chronic absence levels in California is slowing. This sluggishness reflects an even greater need for intentional investment, over time, in engaging students and families, as well as in helping them overcome barriers to getting to school,” said Hedy Chang, CEO and president of Attendance Works.

“The slowing decline in chronic absence shows that recovery will require sustained investment,” said Lupita Alcala, Executive Director of Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE). “The data make clear that we must act with urgency—particularly for students experiencing poverty, homelessness, foster care involvement or students with disabilities—so that recovery efforts reach those who have been most affected.”

“While families are aware of the importance of kindergarten and first grade, some face systemic barriers to attendance,” said Professor Kevin Gee, with the University of California, Davis, School Policy, Action and Research Center (SPARC). “Intentionally focusing on reducing kindergarten absences has the potential to break the cycle of persistent absenteeism which has long term impacts on student learning and well-being.”

Top findings from each of the three research briefs:

Unpacking California's Chronic Absence Crisis Through 2024-25: Eight Key Facts by Hedy Chang and Belen Chavez with Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE), examines statewide trends in chronic absence during the 2025-25 school year. Key findings include:

- The rate of chronic absence decreased only slightly, to 19.4 % (or 1,143,668 students)—still 7 percentage points above prepandemic levels.
- Nearly half of California schools have high (20-29% of students) or extreme (30% or more of students) levels of chronic absence.
- Chronic absence is most pervasive in the highest poverty schools, where its consequences are also most severe. While the most affluent schools have almost recovered to prepandemic levels, two third of the highest poverty schools still experience high or extreme chronic absences.
- Chronic absence is highest in kindergarten and in high school, with high school rates being most difficult to improve.
- By count, the largest number of schools with high and extreme chronic absence served elementary students. The large number of elementary schools still with high and extreme levels of chronic absence is particularly concerning given the potential long-term and costly consequences if young students fall behind academically and do not develop habits of regular attendance early in their school careers.

The Persistence of Chronic Absence Between Kindergarten and 1st Grade in California: Insights to Break the Cycle of Absenteeism, by Professor Kevin Gee with the University of California, Davis, SPARC, Hedy Chang, Cecelia Leong, vice president of programs of Attendance Works, and shows that:

- Chronically absent kindergartners were 7.2 times more likely to be chronically absent in 1st grade versus nonchronically absent kindergartners, underscoring the need to tackle chronic absence early before negative impacts on learning and development accumulate.
- Chronically absent kindergartners experiencing homelessness and from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds face higher risks of remaining chronically absent in 1st grade.
- Before the pandemic chronically absent kindergartners were slightly more likely to be chronically absent in 1st grade. This demonstrates that the relationship is potentially malleable and the drop in chronic absence from before to after the pandemic may be due to successful efforts to intervene.

An Overlooked Early Warning Signal: Chronic Absence and District Mobility in Grades K-3 in California, by Kevin Gee and Hedy Chang, found that:

- Chronically absent K-3 students are more likely to change districts between school years, and to remain chronically absent in their new districts compared to those who stayed.
- Black K-3 students and students experiencing homelessness who are chronically absent have the highest chance of changing districts.
- The analysis highlights how these students need targeted assistance in order to break the cycle of chronic absence.

About Attendance Works

Attendance Works (<https://www.attendanceworks.org>) is a national and state initiative that promotes equal opportunities to learn and advances student success by inspiring and catalyzing policies and practices that prevent and reduce chronic absence. Our website offers an array of strategies and downloadable tools to help schools, districts and states address chronic absence.

About SPARC at UC Davis

The School Policy, Action, and Research Center (SPARC) at UC Davis (<https://education.ucdavis.edu/sparc>) generates research leading to actionable insights that can support the educational wellbeing of vulnerable youth. Our work supports children experiencing adverse life and social circumstances, including Asian American and Pacific Islander youth who have been bullied, children experiencing chronic absenteeism, and child welfare-involved youth who have experienced maltreatment.

About PACE

Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE) (<https://edpolicyinca.org>) is an independent, nonpartisan research center led by faculty directors at Stanford University, the University of California Berkeley, the University of California, Davis, the University of California, Los Angeles, and the University of Southern California. PACE bridges the gap between research, policy, and practice, working with scholars and authors and with state and local decision-makers to achieve improvement in performance at all levels of California's education system.