

Unpacking Unexcused Absences in Maryland: A Working Paper

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Executive Summary

Showing up regularly to school matters. When students miss school, it can lead to them falling behind academically and socially. In Maryland, chronic absence (missing 10% or more of school days for any reason) rose from 19.5% in 2019 to 30.9% in 2022. Since then, chronic absence declined to 26.7% in 2024. Strong gains in attendance are essential for Maryland to reach its goal of reducing chronic absence to 15% by 2026.

This report examines how long-standing policies and practices of the truancy system—the application of the unexcused absence code—could be hindering system-wide efforts to improve attendance, particularly for the student groups with high rates of chronic absence.

Maryland law allows districts to apply exclusionary approaches to unexcused absences. Exclusionary practices can include removing students from the classroom and preventing students from getting credit for completed work. Exclusionary practices used in Maryland include not being allowed to give credit for make-up work after an unexcused absence, in-school suspension, denial of credit for a course or the entire semester, exclusion from extracurricular activities, and, ultimately, court referrals, court appearances and fines for students or their parents.

These exclusionary responses to absenteeism do not identify or address the underlying reasons behind students missing school. A significant number of absences are, in fact, caused by challenges beyond a student's or family's control (e.g., unreliable transportation, unstable housing, lack of safe paths to school, etc.), as well as challenges experienced in school (e.g., bullying, struggling academically, unwelcoming school culture, etc.). Evaluations of exclusionary strategies have revealed they are largely ineffective and, in some cases, exacerbate absenteeism.

Current practices in the labeling of absences as unexcused also contribute to educational and juvenile justice inequities. Previous research in California and Minnesota found that the absences of students who are economically disadvantaged, Black, Pacific Islander, Hispanic, and Native American are much more likely to be coded unexcused, and that the disparate coding of absences as unexcused is a primary cause for disparities in juvenile justice involvement for truancy. In this working paper, we find that racial, ethnic, and economic disparities also exist in Maryland's use of the unexcused code and that these disparities likely lead to disparities in juvenile justice involvement.

Purpose

To better understand patterns of unexcused absences and how districts respond, we sought to answer the following questions:

- A. What percentage of absences are coded unexcused in Maryland?
- B. How does the percentage of absences coded unexcused vary by grade, economic status and student group?
- C. How do district policies defining excused vs. unexcused absence vary across Maryland?
- D. How do districts respond to unexcused absence in Maryland?

This working paper shares the findings of our analysis. It seeks to inform local and state efforts in Maryland to improve attendance and other student outcomes as well as reduce educational inequities. It also can help policymakers, practitioners and researchers outside of Maryland conduct a similar analysis using their own data.

Methods

The Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE) provided school-level data on excused and unexcused absences by student group for the 2021-22 and 2022-23 school years. We included all public schools that served the general population of students and that had over 50 students. Results may differ slightly from data reported by MSDE due to these selection criteria.

We also reviewed written district attendance policies from district websites, student and parent handbooks, school board policy documents on BoardDocs®, and codes of conduct. We documented the reasons for absence that districts excused and the consequences for unexcused and excused absences.

Results

Our analysis of attendance data and district attendance policies in Maryland's 24 districts revealed the following:

- A. What percentage of absences are coded unexcused in Maryland?
The majority of absences in Maryland are coded unexcused, with unexcused being the default absence assigned if the student does not produce a legitimate excuse.
- B. How does the percentage of absences coded unexcused vary by grade, economic status and student group?
Economically disadvantaged, Black, Hispanic, Native American, and multilingual learner students have their absences disproportionately coded unexcused.
- C. How do district policies defining excused vs. unexcused absence vary across Maryland?
Large variability exists across districts in what defines excused absences.

D. How do districts respond to unexcused absence in Maryland?

- a. Most districts' policies spell out more exclusionary responses to unexcused absences.
- b. Exclusionary practices often begin after a single unexcused absence.
- c. Inconsistencies and lack of clarity within the unexcused absence policies make it difficult for parents to support children's attendance and avoid exclusionary discipline. For example, unclear parent notification policies may inhibit schools and families from working together to improve attendance.

Together, these findings suggest that the student groups that already experience the greatest education inequities in other areas, such as lack of access to resources and being more likely to be subject to out-of-school suspensions, may be disproportionately responded to punitively for absences that occur for reasons outside of their control, reasons which would be excused if schools were able to find out the causes of their absences and if more reasons for absences were considered excused.

Recommendations

We offer the following recommendations for modernizing Maryland's approach to truancy and equitably improving attendance.

1. **Move Away from Unexcused as the Default Code.** Local education agencies (LEA) should cease using unexcused or excused as the default for coding absences. Absences could be considered unverified until school staff have an opportunity to communicate with the student's family and determine the appropriate code.
2. **Equip schools with resources and technology to ensure two-way personalized communication** with families after an absence to find out from the family why the student has missed school.
3. **Build data systems that document reasons, barriers and interventions.** Student information systems should electronically capture specific reasons for absence or barriers to attendance (whether absences are excused or unexcused), and the intervention(s) that are assigned to a student or group of students along with the ability to monitor the implementation of the intervention over time.
4. **Ensure outreach to chronically absent students and their families.** Standardize practice so that all schools reach out to families when students are chronically absent) at any point in the year, including during the first few months of school.
5. **Establish parity in student experience by updating Maryland laws and regulations as well as district policies.** Across the state, ensure there is a common approach to determining what constitutes an excused absence when documentation should be submitted and what are the consequences of absence.
6. **Provide professional development on effective attendance practice.** Train district and school staff on protocols for identifying and documenting barriers to attendance, as well as how to develop the right strategies and approaches to addressing barriers, including the capacity to implement and monitor interventions.

7. **Adopt an attendance multi-tiered systems of support (MTSS) framework for use across Maryland.** It should begin with establishing positive conditions for learning, ensure early intervention and encompass responses to excused and unexcused absences. Align the attendance MTSS with academic and behavioral tiered strategies.
8. **Conduct additional research about how improving truancy related practice can increase attendance** including a) examining whether reducing disparities in the labeling of absences as unexcused reduces chronic absence rates; and, b) assessing the effectiveness of truancy reduction programs.

I. Introduction

Showing up regularly to school matters. Students gain from curriculum and instruction, benefit from connecting with peers and adults, and access opportunities uniquely available on school campuses, such as after-school music, art and sports (Attendance Works, 2022). When students miss school, it is easy for them to fall behind academically and socially—especially if their families lack the means to make up for lost opportunities at school (Aucejo, et al., 2016; Chang & Romero, 2008; Gershenson et al., 2017; Goodman, 2014).

Improving attendance is crucial to advance student success and reduce educational inequities, especially in the aftermath of the pandemic. In Maryland, chronic absence (missing 10% or more of school days for any reason) rose from 19.5% in 2019 to 30.9% in 2022. Since then, chronic absence declined to 29.8% in 2023 and to 26.7% in 2024 (MSDE 2025).

Strong gains in attendance are essential for Maryland to reach its goal of reducing chronic absence to 15% by 2026. This report examines how long-standing policies and practices of the truancy system—the application of the unexcused absence code—could be hindering system-wide efforts to improve attendance, particularly for the student groups with the highest rates of chronic absence.

Long-standing truancy policies lead to absences being coded “unexcused” even when the parent or student missed school for unavoidable reasons (McNeely, et al, 2021). Unexcused absences are then treated differently from excused absences. For example, in several Maryland school districts, teachers are not allowed to give credit for make-up work after an unexcused absence but are required to assist with make-up work after excused absences. As unexcused absences accumulate, responses typically become more exclusionary and can involve in-school suspensions, denial of credit for a course or the entire semester, exclusion from extracurricular activities, and, ultimately, court referrals, court appearances and potentially fines for students or their parents.

These exclusionary responses to absenteeism do not identify or address the underlying reasons behind students missing school (Keppens & Spruyt, 2020). A significant number of absences are, in fact, caused by challenges experienced in the community that are beyond a student’s or family’s control (e.g., lack of access to health care, unreliable transportation, unstable housing, lack of safe paths to school, etc.), as well as challenges experienced in school (e.g., bullying, struggling academically, etc.) (Attendance Works & Healthy Schools Campaign, 2015; Brundage et al, 2017; Allison & Attisha, 2019). Moreover, exclusionary responses may undermine efforts to partner with students and families to promote both attendance and learning. Exclusionary practices remove students from the classroom and prevent students from getting credit for completed work. When students and families perceive that the unexcused-absence label is unfairly applied, they may lose trust in schools and disengage from learning (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Edwards et al, 2023). Strategies to improve attendance are thus less likely to succeed. Evaluations of exclusionary strategies find they are largely ineffective (Anderson 2019. Keppens & Spruyt, 2020) and, in some cases, exacerbate absenteeism (McNeely, et al, 2019; Lee, et al, 2020).

An emerging body of research suggests the current practices in the labeling of absences as unexcused contribute to educational and juvenile justice inequities. Research conducted in California found that the absences of students who are economically disadvantaged, Black, Pacific Islander, Hispanic and Native American are much more likely to be coded unexcused (McNeely, Chang & Gee, 2023). Another study in Minnesota showed that disparities in use of the unexcused label fully explained the large disparities in truancy petitions to juvenile court between Black, Hispanic and White students, but not Native students (McNeely, et al, 2021). In other words, if there were no disparity in the coding of absences as unexcused, there would be no disparity in juvenile justice involvement for truancy. Research also shows that the disproportionate attribution of unexcused absences is not universal, with some “bright spot” schools achieving high attendance with judicious and equitable use of the unexcused label (McNeely, Chang & Gee, 2023).

Consider This: Two Students with Asthma

- At the beginning of the school year both students experience seasonal allergies and miss 5 days of school. One student has a family physician, and their parents are familiar with school policies. This student returns to school with a doctor’s note, and their five absences are excused.
- The second student does not have a health care provider or a note. Their absences are coded unexcused, the default in the system.
- As the school year progresses, both students miss more school due to their asthma. The student with healthcare and policy-savvy parents gets extra support with missed homework after their absences are excused.
- The unexcused absences of the student without health care continue to accumulate. They are not allowed to turn in make-up work, and their grades suffer. Their parents receive a letter stating they may be taken to court if their child’s truancy continues.

II. Purpose: To Examine Patterns of Unexcused Absence and How School Districts Respond in Maryland

To better understand patterns of unexcused absences and how districts respond, we sought to answer the following questions:

- A. What percentage of absences are coded unexcused in Maryland?
- B. How does the percentage of absences coded unexcused vary by grade, economic status and student group?
- C. How do district policies defining excused vs. unexcused absence vary across Maryland?
- D. How do districts respond to unexcused absence in Maryland?

This working paper shares the findings of our analysis. It seeks to inform local and state efforts in Maryland to improve attendance and other student outcomes as well as reduce educational inequities. It also can help policymakers, practitioners and researchers outside of Maryland conduct a similar analysis using their own data.

III. Overview of Methods

To answer the first two questions, we obtained data with the help and support of the MSDE. MSDE provided the following data for each school in Maryland for the 2022 and 2023 school years: the total number of days absent, the total number of days attended, the total number of unlawful days absent and the total number of days suspended. This data was provided for the full population of students in each school and for several subgroups of students: economically disadvantaged, students with a disability, multilingual learners and six racial and ethnic groups (Native American, Asian, Black, Hispanic, Pacific Islander, two or more races and White).

We limited the analysis to schools with greater than 50 students that served general populations of students in grades K-12 (i.e., no juvenile justice, special education, early childhood learning centers, or alternative schools). We calculated the mean number of days absent per 180 school days and the percentage of all absences coded unexcused for each school, for each district and for the state as a whole. Our estimates may not match official MSDE numbers due to our exclusion of small schools and different methodologies. Please see the appendix for a detailed description of the methods.

To document how unexcused absences are defined and responded to across Maryland's 24 districts, we reviewed the following documents:

- a) *District websites*. The websites tended to provide information on the importance of school attendance and the most severe consequences for not attending school (e.g., court and fines).
- b) *Student and parent handbooks*. These tended to provide information on attendance expectations, excused reasons for absence, how to submit documentation and some specific consequences that occurred after a given number of absences. We searched in the handbooks for all information related to attendance, absenteeism, tardies, truancy and make-up work.
- c) *School board policy documents on BoardDocs®*. These contained information similar to the parent and student handbooks, with references to the state legal codes that supported each policy.
- d) *Codes of conduct*. These explained the consequences for behavioral infractions, which included missing a single day or part of a day without a valid excuse, as well as habitual truancy (defined as eight unexcused days in a grading period, 15 in a semester or 20 in a year). Almost all of the districts' codes of conduct set forth five levels of interventions, with the first level focused on classroom interventions, the second level focused on school-level interventions, and the third level focused on district- and community-level interventions. Each level contained a list of encouraged responses to behavioral infractions. We searched for all references to attendance, absenteeism, tardies, and truancy.

We took an inclusive approach to coding the consequences of unexcused absences. If a potential consequence was mentioned in any of the sources of information, we coded the consequence as part of district policy. We did not examine the extent to which the allowed consequences in each district were implemented.

Two of the authors (McNeely and West) reviewed all policy documents independently. They recorded the excused reasons for absence, the number of days allowed to turn in a valid excuse, whether the consequences for excused and unexcused absences differed, the consequences for unexcused absences,

and the number of unexcused absences that triggered each consequence. The double coding assured that all policies were recorded accurately.

IV. The Maryland Context: State Policies Regulating Unexcused Absences

Maryland's compulsory education laws mandate that children attend school between the ages of five and 18. State laws set out minimum requirements for how excused and unexcused absences are defined, recorded and responded to. State law mandates that absences be coded as excused when they occur for one of 11 reasons and the parent provides a valid excuse (see box, Excused Reasons for Absences in Maryland). The state allows districts to excuse absences for additional reasons, and several districts choose to do so.

Excused reasons for absences in Maryland

Students are considered lawfully absent from school if they have a valid excuse provided by a parent, guardian or healthcare provider for the following reasons:

- Death in the immediate family. The local school system shall determine what relationships constitute the immediate family.
- Illness of the student. Absences are excused for emotional distress as well as for physical illness. The school district determines the number of days of continuous absence for illness that a parent can excuse before a physician's certificate is required.
- Pregnancy and parenting related conditions, as determined by the local school system, including absences due to medical appointments, labor, delivery, legal appointments and illness of the child.
- Court summons.
- Hazardous weather conditions, defined as weather conditions which would endanger the health or safety of the student when in transit to and from school.
- Work approved or sponsored by the school, district or the MSDE.
- Observance of a religious holiday.
- State emergency.
- Suspension.
- Lack of authorized transportation. This does not include students denied authorized transportation for disciplinary reasons.
- Other emergency or set of circumstances which, in the judgment of the superintendent or designee, constitutes a good and sufficient cause for absence from school.

Source: COMAR Sec. 13A.08.01.03

Absences for any reason that is not excused, or for an excused reason but for which there is not proper documentation, are defined as unlawful or unexcused absences and are considered truancy. ***In practice, the unexcused code is the default code in most, if not all, districts' data systems. Unless coded otherwise, absences are unexcused.***

Maryland's education statute defines truancy as eight unexcused days in any quarter, 15 days in any semester or 20 days in any year (Education Code § 7-302.2 (2023)). The MSDE's regulations contain two definitions of truancy (COMAR Sec. 13a.08.01.04). ***Truancy*** is defined as missing school for even part of a day without a valid excuse. ***Habitual truancy*** is defined as being unlawfully absent from school

in excess of 20% of the school days within any marking period, semester or year. Additionally, the MSDE set forth a policy ruling that students be enrolled in school for at least 91 days for their absences to be considered habitual truancy (MSDE, 2022). Local school systems have the prerogative to define habitual truancy more stringently (for example, unlawful absences in excess of 15% of school days) (COMAR Sec. 13a.08.01.04).

Maryland requires each local school system to develop an attendance policy that includes the following:

- Definition of lawful and unlawful absences and tardiness.
- Standards for regular attendance and penalties for not meeting those standards.
- Procedures for verifying absences/tardiness, including the responsible persons, time limits and methods of absent/tardy verification.
- Make-up work requirements, including classroom teacher and student responsibility, time limits and grading policy for make-up work.
- An attendance monitoring procedure that includes:
 - Record-keeping format to comply with state requirements.
 - Intervention strategies and procedures for dealing with absenteeism at the beginning stages of the problem as well as chronic absence.
 - A referral process to pupil services or other central office professionals for case management of chronic absence cases.
- A reward process that includes an identified motivational program to reward regular school attendance.
- Presentation of the plan's legal foundation, including citations of legal authority for attendance policy development and implementation.
- A strategy to inform school staff, students, parents and community members of attendance policy requirements.
- A process for parents to appeal attendance violation decisions at the school and central office level.

Source: COMAR Sec. 13a.08.01.05

Schools are required to promptly refer habitually truant students to the district's active intervention program, to have a conference with parents and to provide parents with a community resource list (Education Code § 7-302.2 (2023)). All school districts with habitual truancy rates greater than 1% are required to use multi-tiered systems of support to address absenteeism, regardless of whether the absences are lawful (excused) or unlawful (unexcused).

Beyond these minimum legal requirements, districts have autonomy in determining the consequences for unexcused absences and the timing of those consequences. Allowed actions include denying credit for make-up work, courses or an entire semester; interventions such as counseling, referrals to community services or attendance contracts; detention; and retention for a course or an entire grade. Schools may also petition habitually truant students and families to court. Seven districts have dedicated truancy courts, known as the truancy reduction pilot program (COMAR Sec. 13a.08.01.03).

V. Findings

What percentage of absences are coded unexcused in Maryland?

A.1. In Maryland, the majority of absences are coded unexcused. Between the 2022 and 2023 school years, the percentage of absences coded unexcused decreased from 69% to 65%.

During this same time, the mean number of absences per student per year decreased slightly from 16.8 to 16.5 days.

A.2. The percentage of absences coded unexcused varies substantially across districts.

As the chart below shows, the percent of absences coded unexcused in 2023 ranged from a low of 14% in Saint Mary's County to a high of 92% in Baltimore City.

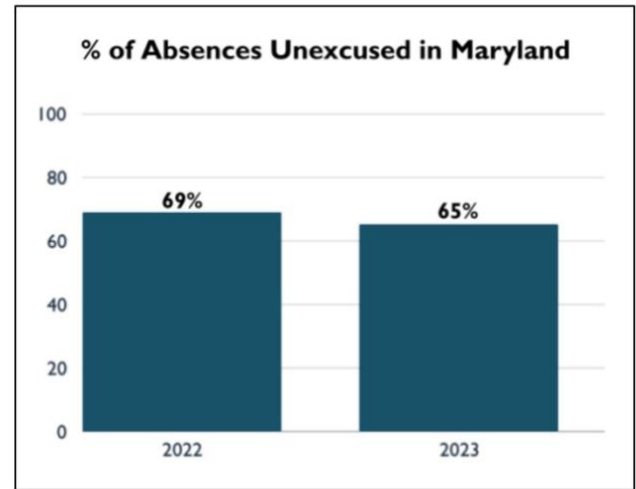


Figure A.1. The percentage of absences coded unexcused in Maryland, 2022 and 2023 school years.

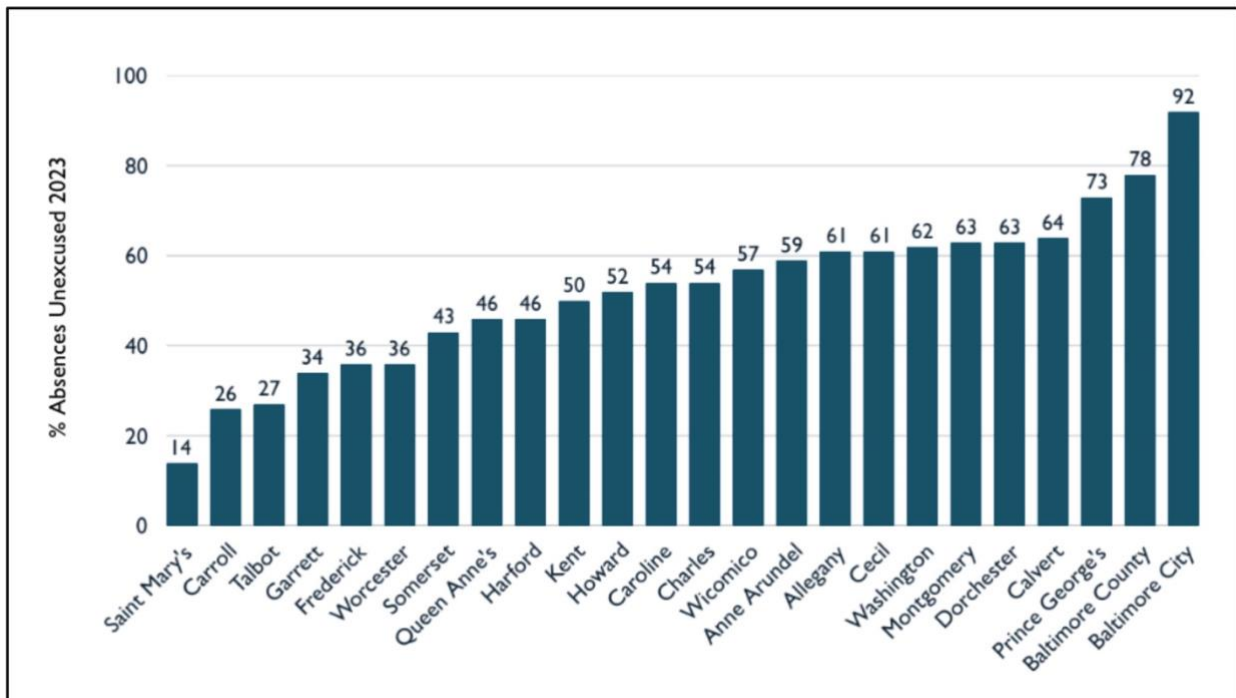


Figure A.2. The percentage of absences coded unexcused by school district during the 2023 school year.

Why are so many absences coded unexcused in Baltimore City?

Baltimore City Public School System (BCPSS) stands out for the high percentage of absences coded unexcused. To further understand this pattern, we examined the district's written policies, spoke with six school attendance liaisons and met with the superintendent along with key administrators.

Based on this further investigation, it appears that although almost all absences are coded unexcused in Baltimore City, the school district does not require and even actively discourages exclusionary approaches for unexcused absences. BCPSS attributes this situation to its focus on using chronic absence data (which does not distinguish between excused vs. unexcused absences) not truancy data to guide their attendance strategies. BCPSS attendance liaisons explained that they work with school staff to identify and address causes of absenteeism.

The high percentage of absences coded unexcused (92%), combined with the high rate of chronic absence (57%), results in 24% of BCPSS students being classified as habitually truant, compared to the statewide average of 6% (MSDE, 2023). *The extent to which this high rate of absences leads to exclusionary discipline is unclear without further research.* BCPSS policies do specify exclusionary discipline strategies, such as a petition to truancy court for habitually truant students. However, habitual truancy does not automatically trigger a referral to truancy court. According to BCPSS, court referrals are made on a case-by-case basis, with truancy court viewed as a last resort.

Further exploration of Baltimore City's use of the unexcused code would be helpful as the district modernizes its truancy system.

A.3. In three districts, the percentage of absences coded unexcused declined sharply from 2022 to 2023.

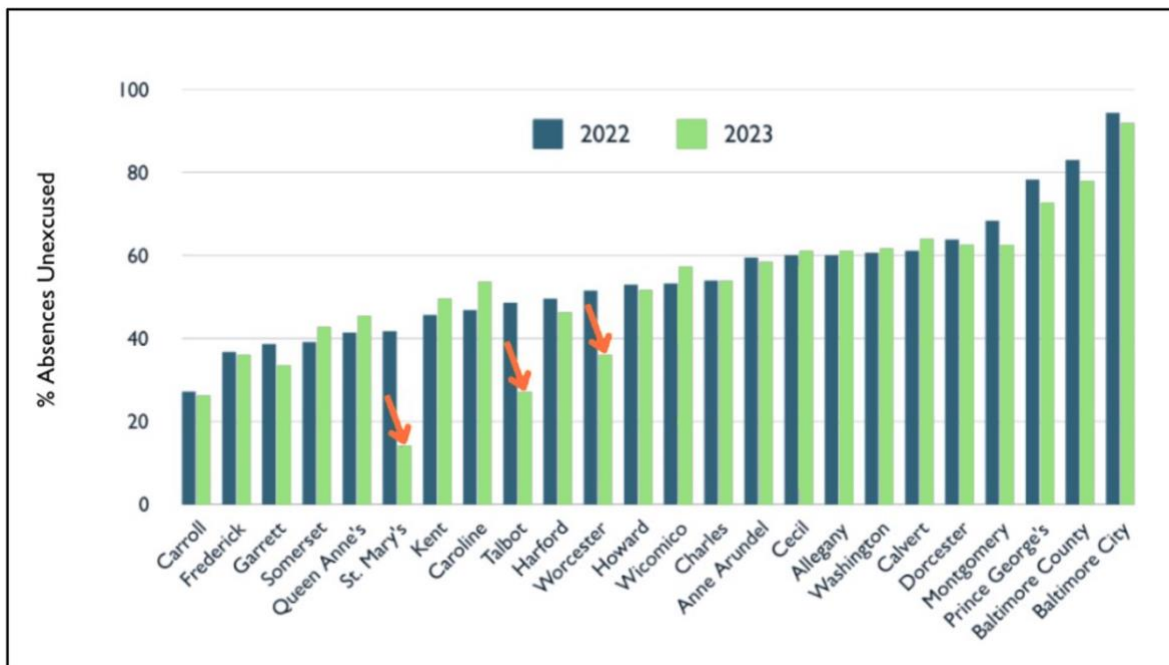


Figure A.3. The percentage of absences coded unexcused by school district during the 2022 and 2023 school years.

Between the 2022 and the 2023 school years, St. Mary’s County reduced the percentage of absences coded unexcused from 41.8% to 14.3%, Talbot County reduced the percentage from 48.7% to 27.2%, and Worcester County reduced the percentage from 51.6% to 36.2%. Absenteeism did not increase in these three districts with the reduction in the use of the unexcused code.

B. How does the percentage of absences coded unexcused vary by grade, race/ethnicity, economic status and student group?

B.1. High school students had more of their absences coded unexcused.

In 2023, 72% of absences for students in grades 9-12 were coded unexcused, compared to 61% in grades K-8. The pattern was similar in 2022.

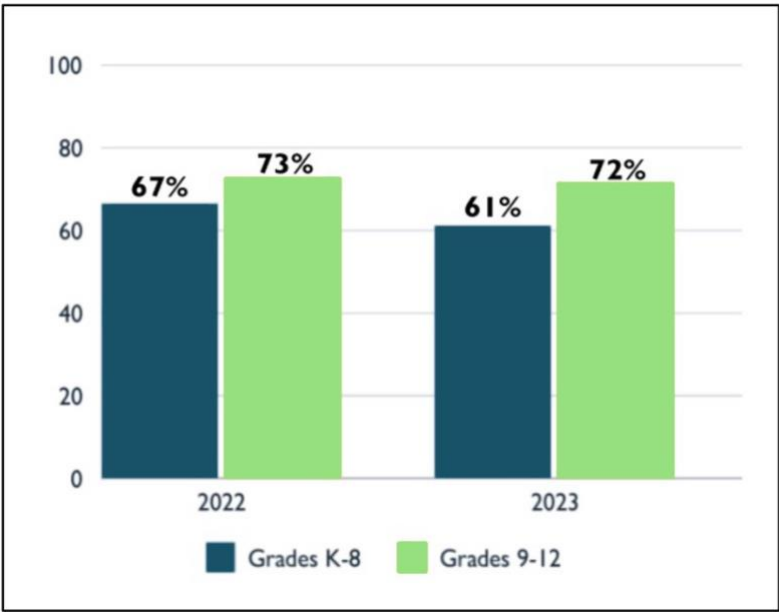


Figure B.1. Percentage of absences coded unexcused by grade category, 2022 and 2023 school years.

For this chart, we excluded the schools that served students in grades K-12 and the schools that served students in grades 6-12. We could not examine disparities across specific grades because we did not request grade data from MSDE.

B.2.a. Native American, Black, and Hispanic students had a greater percentage of their absences coded unexcused.

In 2023, 81% of Native American students’ absences, 77% of Black students’ absences, and 72% of Hispanic students’ absences were coded unexcused. In contrast, these percentages were 57% for students of two or more races, 50% for Asian students, and 47% for White students. The magnitude of these disparities remained roughly the same between 2022 and 2023.

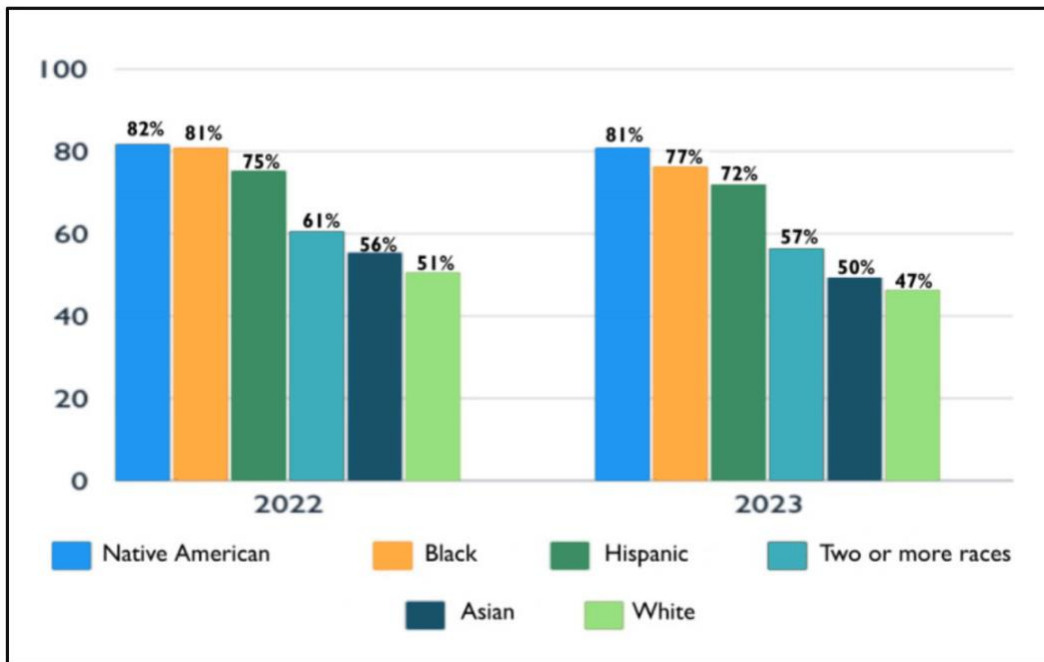


Figure B.2.a. Percentage of absences coded unexcused by racial and ethnic group, 2022 and 2023 school years.

B.2.b. Racial and ethnic disparities in the percentage of absences unexcused cannot be explained by the fact that, on average, some racial and ethnic groups miss more days of school than others.

As shown below, Asian students missed much less school than White students but have more of their absences coded unexcused.

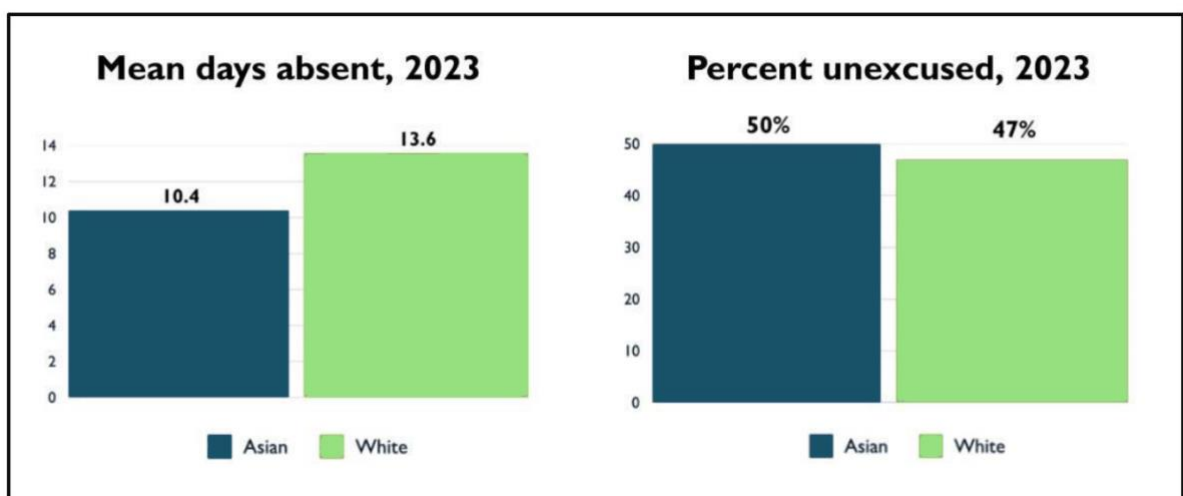


Figure B.2.b. The mean number of days absent and the percentage of absences unexcused among Asian and White students in 2023.

On average, in 2023 Asian students missed 30% fewer days of school than White students: 10.4 days vs.13.6 days. Yet Asian students had a slightly greater percentage of their absences coded unexcused: 50% vs. 47% of absences. This pattern was consistent with the 2022 school year.

B.3. Economically disadvantaged students had a greater percentage of their absences coded unexcused.

In 2023, 74% of the absences of economically-disadvantaged students were labeled unexcused, compared to 56% of the absences for not-economically-disadvantaged students. The MSDE defines families as economically disadvantaged if their income is at or below the level that would qualify their child for free or reduced-price meals under the U.S. Department of Agriculture's (USDA) eligibility guidelines. Students are automatically classified (i.e., directly certified) as economically disadvantaged if they are enrolled in another means-tested program such as Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) or Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) or if they are a foster child.

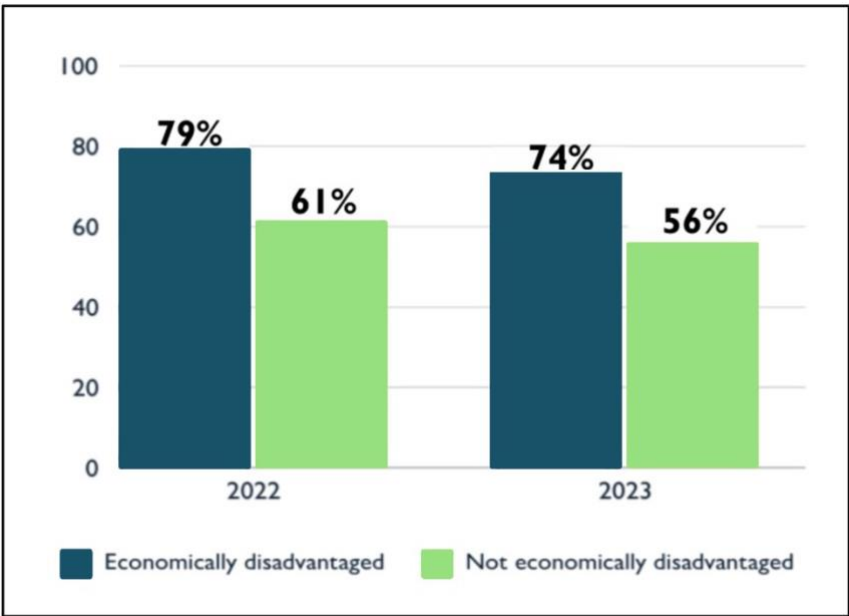


Figure B.3. Percentage of absences coded unexcused by economic disadvantage, 2022 and 2023 school years.

The size of the disparity (18 percentage points) was identical in 2022 and 2023, even as declines occurred in absenteeism and use of the unexcused label. This suggests that reducing the overall percentage of absences that are unexcused or reducing chronic absence may not address disparities in coding.

B.4. Multilingual learners had a greater percentage of their absences coded unexcused. In 2023, students in multilingual learner programs had 75% of their absences unexcused, compared to 64% for other students. This is similar to the pattern the year before.

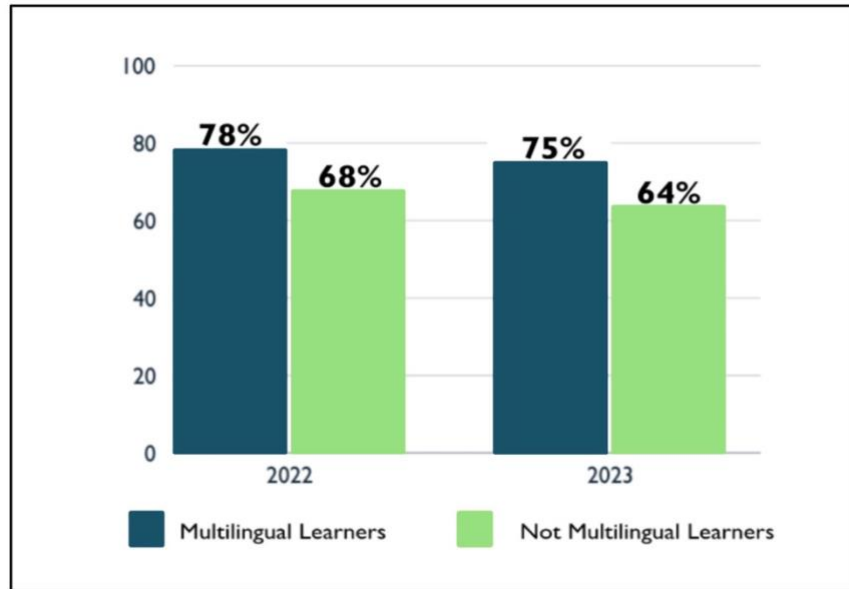


Figure B.4. Percentage of absences coded unexcused by multilingual learner status, 2022 and 2023 school years.

B.5. Disparities in unexcused absences by disability status were small.

Overall, there was little difference in the percentage of absences coded unexcused between students with and without a disability (68% vs. 65% in 2023).

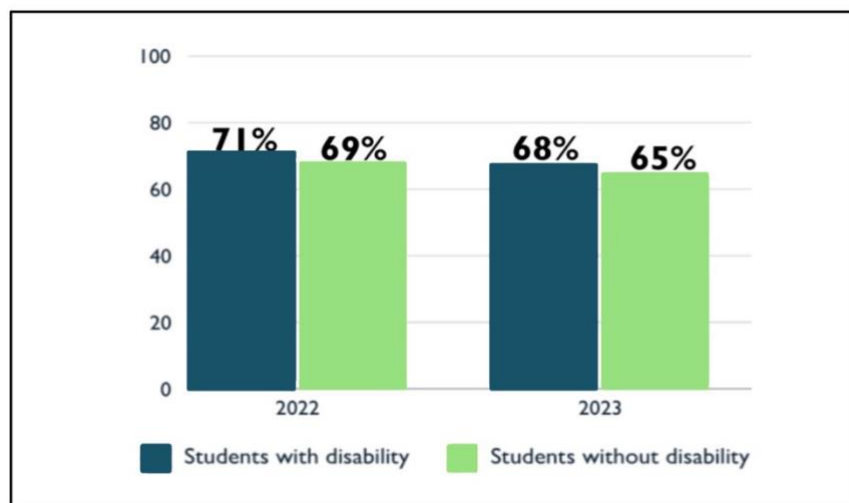


Figure B.5 Percentage of absences coded unexcused by disability status, 2022 and 2023 school years.

C. How do district policies defining excused vs. unexcused absence vary across Maryland?

Maryland law recognizes 11 lawful reasons for student absences (see sidebar on page 8), deeming all other reasons as unlawful or unexcused. However, the law allows districts to excuse additional reasons for absence. The law also allows districts to set their own policies regarding the number of absences that can be excused in any given term and the number of days allowed for parents to turn in a valid excuse.

C.1. Many districts excused reasons for absence in addition to those listed in Maryland's educational laws.

These additional reasons included college visits (excused in 12 districts), vacations (10 districts), military deployment of a parent (6 districts), civic engagement (e.g., volunteering to be an election worker; 4 districts), impoverished conditions (one district), and family illness (one district).

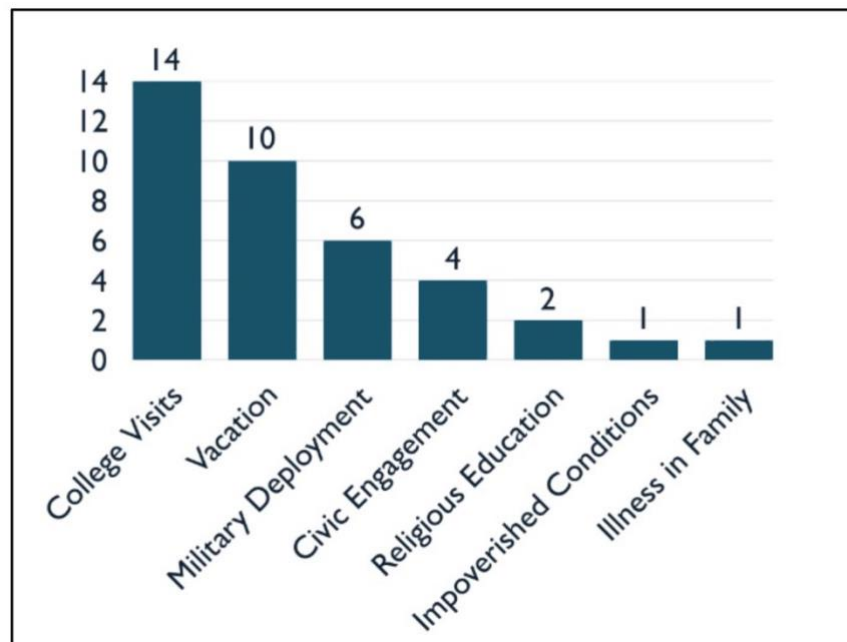


Figure C1. Number of districts that excused additional reasons.

Districts varied in the extent to which they used the option to excuse additional reasons for absence. Carroll County excused five additional reasons for absence. Five counties did not list any additional excused reasons for absence in their written policies.

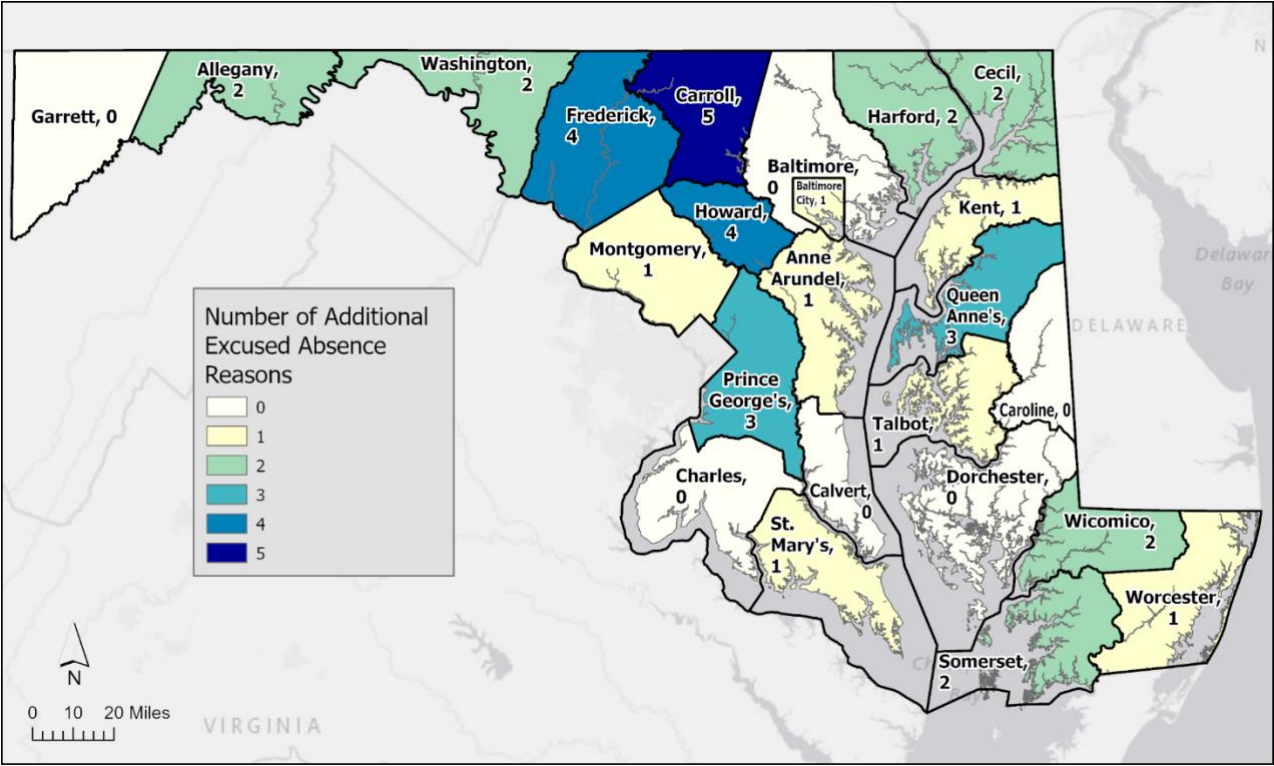


Figure C.1. Number of additional excused absence reasons in each school district in Maryland.

Additionally, districts varied substantially in the number of absences parents are allowed to excuse each term. Twelve of Maryland’s school districts did not set a limit on the number of absences a parent or guardian could excuse. In the other 12 districts, parents were limited to excusing between three and 16 days of absence unless they provided external documentation of the reason for absence, such as a note from a medical provider.

C.2. Districts varied substantially on the number of days families were allowed to turn in valid documentation to excuse an absence.

Most districts (17) specified a time limit—typically between three and five days (12 districts) —for valid documentation to be submitted. Seven districts did not specify a time limit in their written policies.

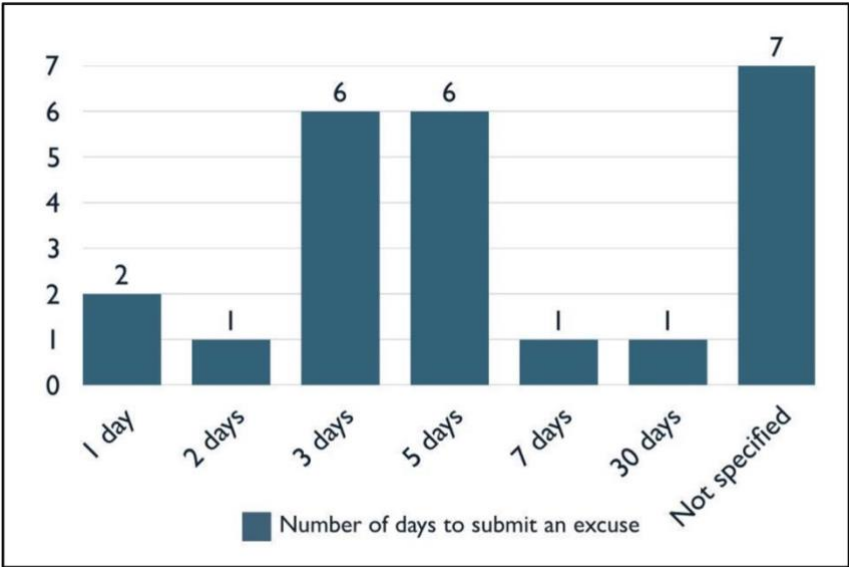


Figure C.2. Number of days allowed to submit a valid excuse for a student absence.

D. How do districts respond to unexcused absences in Maryland?

D.1. Most districts respond with more exclusionary approaches to unexcused absences than to excused absences.

Exclusionary practices are actions that exclude students from academic and social-emotional learning. These include denying credit for work or a course, excluding students from class, excluding students from extracurricular activities, denying participation in normal school privileges such as attending graduation and petitioning students to court for truancy. Exclusionary practices also include requiring extra time at school that does not foster learning but serves to exclude or punish, such as detention and Saturday school.

All districts employ exclusionary approaches for students who are habitually truant. But what happens prior to reaching the level of habitual truancy—20% of days missed due to unexcused absences?

Twenty of the 24 districts allow or require exclusionary consequences, which often begin after a single unexcused absence. Three districts—Calvert County, Cecil County and Prince George’s County—do not differentiate in their treatment of excused and unexcused absences until the student is habitually truant.

D.2. Exclusionary practices often begin after a single unexcused absence.

The first exclusionary consequence in many districts is to deny credit for make-up work after an unexcused absence, even when the student turns in the work. In contrast, state law requires teachers to support students in making up work after an excused absence, if requested to do so.

Table D.2. Policies regarding the denial of credit for make-up work after an unexcused absence.

Make-up Work Policy for Unexcused Absences	Number of Districts
No credit for make-up work, even if turned in	9
Schools or Teachers decide whether to allow make-up work	4
Allow make-up work, but dock grade	1
Allow make-up work for students who miss <10% of days	1
Allow make-up work and give credit	9

D.3. The majority of districts allow or require exclusionary approaches after a student accumulates multiple unexcused absences. The number of absences that trigger exclusionary strategies is not specified in the majority of districts.

Table D.3. Exclusionary discipline policies for unexcused absences.

Exclusionary and Punitive Discipline	Number of Districts
Detention or Saturday School	16
In-school suspension (OSS not allowed by law)	11
Withhold course credit for MS or HS <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Lose credit after 2-6 unexcused absences, can restore credit via Saturday School or improved attendance (3 districts)• Credit for all courses permanently denied for habitually truant students (2 districts)• Procedure not specified (2 districts)	7
Retain students	10

In addition to denying credit for missed work, districts allowed or required detention or Saturday school (16 districts), in-school suspensions (11 districts), withholding course credit in middle school or high school (7 districts), and retaining students for truancy irrespective of their academic performance (10 districts).

Some districts specified when these exclusionary practices are to be used, and these criteria varied widely. For example, the number of full-day unexcused absences after which a student can be retained a grade ranged from four to 27. The majority of districts did not specify when students are to be retained a grade.

We did not assess the extent to which the exclusionary practices listed in districts' written policies were implemented in the districts' schools.

D.4. The districts' multi-tiered systems of supports (MTSS) and tiered discipline strategies do not align.

State law requires districts to use MTSS to reduce unexcused absences if habitual truancy rates in the district are greater than 1%. In the 2022-2023 school year, 22 of the 24 districts had habitual truancy rates greater than 1% (MSDE, 2023).

MTSS is an intervention framework that overcomes the problem of uncoordinated, stand-alone interventions. MTSS supports children's school success through a tiered system of progressively more intensive and individualized interventions (Horner, 2010). Originally, MTSS was designed to reduce school behavior problems (Horner, et al., 2010), and a large body of research demonstrates its success (Bradshaw, et al., 2015; Freeman, et al., 2016; Gage et al., 2018; Horner, et al., 2010). It has also been successful at reducing truancy (Pas, et al., 2019) and increasing attendance (Freeman, et al., 2015).

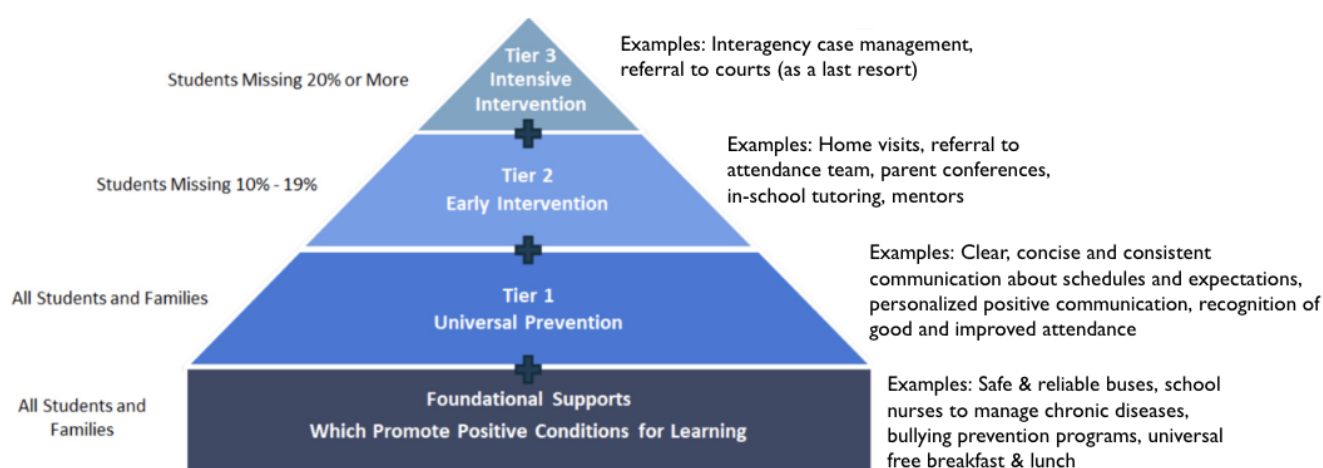


Figure D.4. Multi-tiered systems of support.

The best-practice MTSS framework consists of three tiers. Tier 1 contains the universal interventions provided for all students in the school. Examples of tier 1 activities used in evidence-based MTSS approaches to improve attendance include clear, concise and consistent communication about schedules and expectations; recognition of good and improved attendance; fostering connection to a caring adult in the school; and personalized and positive communication to families when students are absent.

Tier 2 consists of early interventions for students with escalating attendance problems. Examples of tier 2 activities include identifying the root causes for absenteeism and addressing them, adding attendance strategies to individualized education programs (IEPs) and student success plans, meeting with parents about their child's attendance, intensive tutoring and alternatives to discipline and suspension.

Tier 3 consists of intensive, individualized attention, such as interagency case management, housing stability supports and legal intervention as a last resort.

The tiered interventions are most successful when they are built upon and integrated with foundational supports to promote positive conditions for learning. The positive conditions for learning are 1) physical and emotional health and safety; 2) belonging, connectedness and support; 3) academic challenge and engagement; and, 4) adult and student social and emotional competence. Examples of interventions to promote the positive conditions for learning are safe and reliable buses, universal breakfast and lunch, and an engaging and challenging curriculum. Data systems and team problem-solving approaches are integral to MTSS to track students' needs and progress.

The districts describe a MTSS for reducing truancy in the districts' codes of conduct, a handbook that sets out student behaviors that require intervention along with a table of interventions and consequences for each behavior. All districts' code of conduct describes five levels of intervention to be used for all student behaviors requiring correction, including truancy. The first level contains individual interventions done by the teacher (e.g., reminders to attend school). The second level contains interventions to be initiated by the teacher and supported by the administration (e.g., referral to the student support team or pupil personnel worker). The third level of interventions are administrative-supported actions to provide more intensive services (e.g., referral to substance use or mental health services) or to remove the student from the classroom (e.g., in-school suspension). Levels four and five consist of out-of-school suspensions and expulsions, respectively, and cannot be used for truancy, per state law.

Many districts describe interventions for truancy in their code of conduct that are not evidence-based. Examples include, in-school suspensions, detention and denial of credit for missing school (independent of performance in a class).

Additionally, although Maryland state law requires all schools to develop an incentive program for attendance, rewards programs are not effective universal prevention strategies (Keppens & Spruyt, 2020). Almost none of the districts provided publicly-available policy or practice guidance on how to implement incentive programs, and thus it is unclear the extent to which individual schools used incentives to promote attendance.

D.5. Inconsistencies and lack of clarity within the unexcused absence policies make it difficult for parents and teachers to support children's attendance.

Very few districts listed all of their attendance policies in the same place. Rather, we found policies related to absenteeism scattered across the different documents and in different places within the same documents. It would be very difficult for parents to understand the attendance policies in most districts unless they spent hours sifting through the district's and school's documents and website.

In several districts, the policies, if implemented as written, inhibit teachers and parents from supporting their child's school attendance. Over half the districts (14) did not provide any policy guidance on when parents should be notified about their child's unexcused absences.

Nine districts do have a clear policy on when parents should be notified of their child's unexcused absences. In other cases, districts specify when to notify parents, but the timing makes it difficult for parents to partner with schools to improve attendance and reduce exclusionary discipline. For example, three districts (Garret, Montgomery and Worcester) do not notify parents of their child's unexcused absences until it is too late to submit documentation to get the absence excused and too late to request make-up work be given credit.

Two other districts (Prince Georgia’s and Calvert) do not require schools to notify parents of their child’s absenteeism—excused or unexcused—until the children are chronically absent. These two districts do not deny make-up credit for missed work after an unexcused absence, but the delayed notice inhibits early partnership with parents to improve attendance.

VI. Summary and Implications for Action

Our analysis of attendance data and district attendance policies in Maryland’s 24 districts revealed the following:

- 1. The majority of absences in Maryland are coded unexcused, with unexcused being the default absence assigned if the student does not produce a legitimate excuse.
- 2. Economically disadvantaged, Black, Hispanic, Native American, and multilingual learning students have their absences disproportionately coded unexcused.
- 3. Large variability exists across districts in what defines excused absences.
- 4. Most districts’ policies spell out more exclusionary responses to unexcused absences.
- 5. The districts’ tiered disciplinary policies in their Code of Conduct include interventions that are ineffective and not aligned with the best-practice model of tiered systems of support.
- 6. Unclear parent notification policies may inhibit schools and families from working together to improve attendance.

Our analysis of district policies revealed tremendous variation in the definition of excused absences and also in guidance for how schools are to respond to unexcused absences. Despite this variation, in almost all school districts the response to unexcused absences was more punitive and exclusionary than the response to excused absences, and these consequences often began after a single unexcused absence. The contrast in responses is summarized in the table below.

Table VI. Comparison of responses to excused and unexcused absences mandated by Maryland state law and school district policies.

Response to “Excused”	Response to “Unexcused”
✔ Help with homework	✗ No credit for make-up work or exams
✔ Make-up exams	✗ Removal from extracurricular activities
✔ Tutoring provided	✗ Denial of course credit
✔ Participation in extracurricular activities	✗ Detention or in-school suspension
	✗ Referral to counseling or substance use services
	<i>*If unexcused absences accumulate despite earlier outreach from schools and districts, courts can:</i>
	> Fine students and parents
	> Require a parenting program
	> Court referral / Charge parents with a misdemeanor

In sum, our findings suggest that the student groups that already experience the greatest education inequities in other areas, such as out-of-school suspensions, may be disproportionately responded to punitively for absences that occur for reasons outside of their control, reasons which might be excused if schools were able to find out the root causes of their absences.

Limitations

We cannot emphasize enough the need to document policy implementation and not simply written policies. Over the past decade, approaches to addressing chronic absence have shifted rapidly from exclusionary responses to understanding and addressing the root causes of absence. Oftentimes changes in practice outpace changes in written policy, particularly if those changes require changes to state laws. It is possible, for example, that although state law and district policies allow in-school suspensions for absenteeism, this exclusionary practice may not be widely used in the face of the overwhelming evidence of how it contributes to educational inequities.

Recommendations

After consulting with key stakeholders, we developed suggestions for modernizing Maryland's approach to truancy and equitably improving attendance. Further input on these suggested actions is needed and welcomed, and the working paper will be updated as the action steps are refined.

- 1. Move away from unexcused as the default code.** LEAs should cease using unexcused or excused as the default for coding absences. Absences could be considered unverified until school staff have an opportunity to communicate with the student's family and determine the appropriate code.
- 2. Equip schools with resources and technology to ensure two-way personalized communication** with families after an absence to find out from the family why the student has missed school.
- 3. Build data systems that document reasons, barriers and interventions.** Student information systems should electronically capture specific reasons for absence or barriers to attendance (whether absences are excused or unexcused), and the intervention(s) that are assigned to a student or group of students along with the ability to monitor the implementation of the intervention over time.
- 4. Ensure outreach to chronically absent students and their families.** Standardize practice so that all schools reach out to families when students are chronically absent at any point in the year, including during the first few months of school.
- 5. Establish parity in student experience by updating Maryland laws and regulations as well as district policies.** Across the state, ensure there is a common approach to determining what constitutes an excused absence, when documentation should be submitted, and what are the consequences of absence (including prohibiting exclusionary practices).
- 6. Provide professional development on effective attendance practice.** Train district and school staff on protocols for identifying and documenting barriers to attendance as well as how to develop the right strategies and approaches to addressing barriers, including the capacity to implement and monitor interventions.
- 7. Adopt an attendance MTSS framework for use across Maryland.** It should begin with establishing positive conditions for learning, ensure early intervention and encompass responses to excused and unexcused absences. Align the attendance MTSS with academic and behavioral tiered strategies.
- 8. Conduct additional research about how improving truancy related practice can increase attendance** including a) examining whether reducing disparities in the labeling of absences as unexcused reduces chronic absence rates; and, b) assessing the effectiveness of truancy reduction programs.

Appendix A. Methods

Methods for Calculating the Percentage of Absences Coded Unexcused

The MSDE provided school-level data from the 2021-2022 and 2022-23 school years for all public schools in the state.

Schools Included in the Analysis

We restricted the analysis to schools that served students in grades K-12 (e.g., no early learning centers) and that served general populations of students (e.g., no juvenile justice schools, alternative schools or special education schools). Additionally, we excluded schools with fewer than 50 students so that the estimates of the percentages of absences that were excused or unexcused would be stable. The analysis was based on 1,328 schools in 2021-22 school year and 1,330 schools in 2022-2023 school year.

Since the data were at the school level, we could not disaggregate the findings by grade. We were able to compare the percentage of absences coded unexcused across school types, which allowed us to compare two grade categories: K-8 and 9-12. We excluded 13 K-12 schools and 18 combined middle-high schools from this analysis. Results may differ slightly from data reported by MSDE due to differences in inclusion criteria or differences in the measures.

Measures

Number of full-time equivalent students in the school, district and state. For each year, the dataset contained the total number of absences in the school and the total number of days attended in the school. We used these two variables to estimate the number of full-time students in each school, as follows:

$$\# \text{ full-time students} = \left(\frac{\text{total \# days absent in year} + \text{total \# days attended in year}}{180} \right).$$

Percentage of absences unexcused. We calculated the percentage of absences unexcused for each student group at the school, district and state level by dividing the total number of unexcused absences by the total number of absences for each group.

Mean number of days absent per the 180-day school year. We calculated this number for each subgroup in every school, for the district, and for the state as a whole by dividing the total number of absences within a given subgroup by 180. This number can be interpreted as the mean number of absences per student under the assumption that the student stayed in the school the entire year.

Race and ethnicity. Students or families self-identify with a racial group and self-identify as Hispanic or not Hispanic.

Economic disadvantage. The MSDE defines economically disadvantaged students as those whose family income is at or below the level that would qualify a child for free or reduced-price meals under the USDA eligibility guidelines. Students are automatically classified (i.e., directly certified) as economically disadvantaged if they are enrolled in another means-tested program such as SNAP or TANF or if they are a foster child.

Multilingual learner. Potential multilingual learners are identified by asking parents if a language other than English is spoken in the home. These students are then given the English Language Proficiency Exam to determine their English learner status.

Disability. Students who have an IEP.

Methods for Describing Policies

We examined several documents for each district to describe the district attendance policies.

1. *School board policies.* Each district maintains a manual of school board policies that is available through the *BoardDocs* software. An example of these policies for Dorchester County can be found here: <https://go.boarddocs.com/mabe/dcps/Board.nsf/Public>
2. *District websites.* Each district maintains a website with a search engine. We searched on the terms “attendance,” “absence,” “truancy,” and “unexcused” to find all mentions of each school district’s attendance policy and practices. An example of the result of a search on “attendance” for Dorchester County can be found here: <https://www.dcps.k12.md.us/page/attendance-policy>
3. *Student and family handbooks.* We downloaded the 2023-24 handbooks for each district and searched within them for “attendance,” “absence,” “absenteeism,” “truancy,” “unexcused,” and “excused.” In some cases, we used the 2024-25 handbooks when we needed to verify the coding of the earlier handbooks. We examined five sets of handbooks that were available for both the 2022-23 and 2023-24 years and found no differences in policy between the two years.
4. *Student codes of conduct.* We downloaded the 2023-24 handbooks for each district and searched within them for “attendance,” “absence,” “truancy,” and “unexcused.” In some cases, we used the 2024-25 handbooks when we needed to verify the coding of the earlier handbooks. We examined five sets of handbooks that were available for both the 2022-23 and 2023-24 years and found no differences in policy between the two years.

Analysis of Policies Regarding the Determination of Whether an Absence is Excused or Unexcused.

Two coders (McNeely and West) read through all sections of all documents that contained the terms “attendance,” “absence,” “absenteeism,” “truancy,” “excused,” and “unexcused” and independently coded the following for each district: absence reasons that were excused or lawful; absence reasons that were unexcused or unlawful; illness policies (e.g., number of consecutive days of illness allowed before a provider note was required, number of total days of illness allowed to be excused); and policies regarding requirements for a valid excuse (e.g., number of days to submit, how excused could be submitted).

The coders then compared codes. Where codes differed, they returned to the original policy documents to resolve the discrepancy. In every case, the discrepancy was due to one of the coders not seeing a mention of a policy.

In several districts, the policies were not easily accessible, in particular, information on how to submit an excuse and how to request that an absence be excused by the school administrator or their designee were difficult to find. When a clear policy could not be located, the code “policy not specified” was applied.

Analysis of Policies Regarding the Consequences for Unexcused Absences

After completing the coding of reasons for absence, the two coders reread all documents and coded the district policies regarding responses to unexcused absences. We coded the responses listed in the policy documents, whether the responses were mandatory or optional, criteria for implementing the responses (e.g., number of unexcused absences that trigger the response, whether the responses were the same for excused and unexcused absences, and how the response was to be implemented, such as whether the teacher or staff would make a referral for substance use or mental health services).

We followed the coding protocol described above. Although for most districts we could document the responses used in response to unexcused absences, in many cases no information was available on whether the response was mandatory or optional or the criteria for implementing any given response. These policies received the code of “not specified.” In these cases, internal documents may be more specific, or the districts may simply not have a policy regarding a particular aspect of absenteeism.

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The analysis in this working paper is made possible by the generous support of the Open Society Institute-Baltimore, a program of Alliance for Open Society International. While their support is deeply appreciated, the conclusions are those of the authors alone.

Attendance Works (www.attendanceworks.org) is a national nonprofit initiative that advances success in school and beyond for all students by reducing chronic absence. Its website offers a wide array of free materials, tools, research and inspiring stories to help schools, districts and communities work together to reduce chronic absence.

Suggested Citation:

McNeely, C., Chang, H. N., S. Fothergill & I. West, (2025, April). Unpacking Unexcused Absences in Maryland: A Working Paper. Attendance Works.