

# RESEARCH BRIEF

## Absenteeism Matters

An analysis of how missing school impacts academic performance and postsecondary readiness among high school students in Central Florida

MARCH 2024



## About Helios Education Foundation

Helios Education Foundation exists to support postsecondary attainment for for all students, especially low-income and underrepresented communities in Arizona and Florida. Driven by our fundamental beliefs of Community, Equity, Investment, and Partnership, Helios has invested about \$350 million in partnerships and initiatives focused on improving third-grade reading, college-going, and postsecondary attainment in the two states we serve since 2006.

We take a multi-pronged approach—working across four domains, including performance-based community investments, systemic public policy efforts, research and data, and impact-driven communications—that together support the significant changes required to foster equitable progress across the education continuum.

## About Central Florida Education Ecosystem Database

Central Florida Education Ecosystem Database (CFEED) is a partnership, comprised of Helios Education Foundation, the School District of Osceola County, Orange County Public Schools, Valencia College, and the University of Central Florida, along with Midtown Consulting Group, that creates a model of collaborative data sharing among Central Florida pre-kindergarten through university public educational institutions to identify factors that inform decisions and interventions to increase successes, outcomes, and opportunities for all students.





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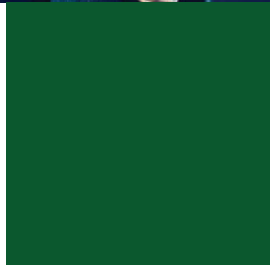
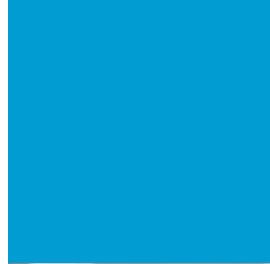
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## Introduction

During the 2021-2022 school year, close to 14.7 million students nationwide were chronically absent, meaning that they missed at least 10 percent of that school year.<sup>1</sup> Nearly 32.25 million students attended a school where at least 20 percent of their schoolmates were chronically absent.<sup>2</sup>

These alarming numbers represent a major spike compared to pre-pandemic chronic absenteeism rates. And Florida is not exempt from this national trend. In the 2022-23 school year, Florida's 30.9 percent chronic absenteeism rate was the seventh highest in the country.

**This amounts to a 54.5 percent increase in chronic absenteeism from the 2018-19 to the 2022-23 school year.**

**Figure 1: Chronic Absenteeism in Florida, by School Year**

	2018-19	2021-22	2022-23
Chronic Absenteeism Rate	20%	32.3%	30.9%

Source: FutureEd

The consequences of so much missed school are significant for students, schools, and communities. When students are chronically absent, they not only miss vital instructional time, but they are also more likely to experience diminished academic achievement, more likely to be chronically absent in later grades, more likely to drop out, and, correspondingly, less likely to graduate high school.

Additionally, in schools with high levels of chronic absenteeism, it is more difficult for teachers to teach and for students to learn. It is also more challenging to cultivate positive school culture and to shrink achievement gaps.

<sup>1</sup>Attendance Works. Turning Back the Tide: The Critical Role of States in Reducing Chronic Absenteeism. January 2024. <https://www.attendanceworks.org/state-data-for-2021-22-school-year/>

<sup>2</sup>Ibid



## **ABOUT THIS BRIEF**

Within the broader national and statewide contexts, the Central Florida Education Ecosystem Database (CFEED) is particularly focused on understanding the ways in which attendance and absenteeism are impacting high school students and schools in two Central Florida districts: the School District of Osceola County (Osceola County) and Orange County Public Schools (Orange County). This specific focus enables CFEED to generate insights that are relevant and actionable for education leaders in the region. It also enables CFEED to ensure that its recommendations for education leaders are specifically tailored for Osceola County and Orange County with the needs of their students and educators in mind.

## **Research Questions**

Using data on 82,118 high school students from Osceola County and Orange County, this study examines chronic absenteeism patterns and the ways chronic absenteeism may affect student performance and postsecondary enrollment. Specifically, the research focuses on five high school cohorts, from 2017 to 2022, based on expected high school graduation year. The study aimed to understand:

1. What effect did the COVID-19 pandemic have on year-by-year chronic absenteeism patterns?
2. What chronic absenteeism trends exist when considering student demographics?
3. What relationships exist between chronic absenteeism and student academic performance?
4. What relationships exist between chronic absenteeism and college matriculation?

## **Diving Deeper: What CFEED Does for Central Florida**

CFEED builds tools and processes that facilitate analysis of student performance from pre-kindergarten through postsecondary. This analysis informs development of relevant, practical interventions that will increase student success. Powered by a data-sharing model among partners and participating institutions in the region, the CFEED database enables researchers and analysts to generate insights based on robust, silo-free datasets for the purposes of supporting improved decision-making that yields better student outcomes.

## About the Data: Defining Chronic Absenteeism in Osceola and Orange Counties

The fundamental definition of chronic absenteeism used in this study differs from the official definition—missing 10 percent or more of the school year, for any reason—used by the Florida Department of Education and by the U.S. Department of Education.

The CFEED research team elected to use a more stringent definition for its analysis of absenteeism in Osceola County and Orange County. This analysis defined chronic absenteeism as missing 10 or more days of school for any reason. This definition highlights emerging attendance issues and, importantly, facilitates monitoring of repetitive annual absenteeism patterns: for example, students who miss 10 or more days of multiple school years. Tracking repetitive absenteeism allows CFEED to evaluate the impact of cumulative absences across school years on student achievement and readiness for major milestones, such as graduation, postsecondary education, and continuous employment.

**Zero to three years of chronic absence:** Students who were chronically absent (10 or more days) in zero to three different school years.

**Repetitively chronically absent:** Students who had chronic absences (10 or more days) in at least four different school years.

## Diving Deeper: Learnings from Arizona

CFEED's analysis of chronic absenteeism in Central Florida builds on previous work Helios Education Foundation has done to understand the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on chronic absenteeism rates in Arizona. For more information about this research, please visit: [www.helios.org/latest/briefs/missing-too-much-school](http://www.helios.org/latest/briefs/missing-too-much-school).



## Summary of Findings

The findings from CFEED’s analysis of attendance data in Osceola County and Orange County reveal alarming levels of absenteeism that often are not limited to a single school year, but instead manifest across years and impact significant portions of students’ academic careers.

Among the 82,118 high school students included in the analysis, more than 29,000 were chronically absent during at least one school year.

This section presents findings from the CFEED study aligned with the specific research question that guided the analysis.

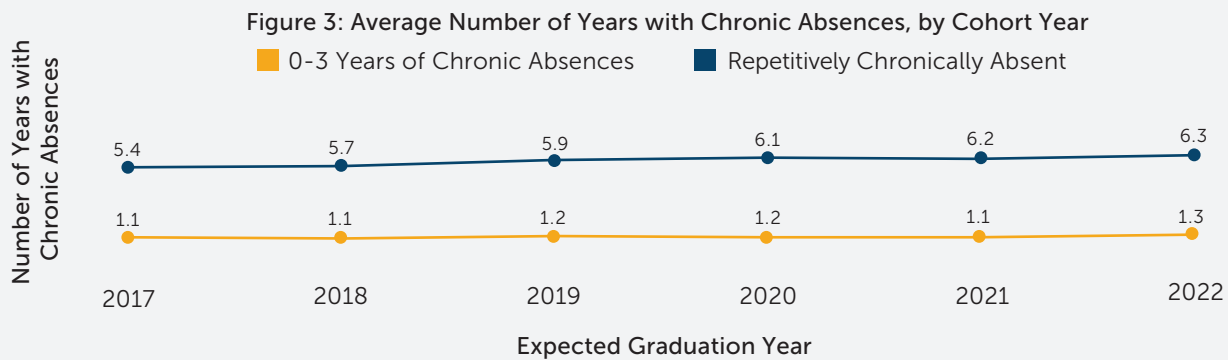
### What effect did the COVID-19 pandemic have on year-by-year chronic absenteeism patterns?

Comparing the 2017 and 2022 cohorts, the total high school students in Osceola County and Orange County who were repetitively chronically absent (missing at least 10 days in four or more school years) increased by 43 percent.

**Figure 2: Percentage of Students in Each Absence Group, by Cohort**

Expected Graduation Year	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
0-3 Years of Chronic Absences	77%	75%	72%	71%	71%	67%
Repetitively Chronically Absent	23%	25%	28%	29%	29%	33%

At the same time, the average number of school years in which students were chronically absent also increased, especially among students who were repetitively chronically absent. Students in the 2022 cohort were chronically absent during 6.3 school years, an increase of almost one year compared to the 2017 cohort. This amounts to being chronically absent during approximately half of their school years in the K-12 system.



### What chronic absenteeism trends exist when considering student demographics?

Chronic absenteeism increased for all student demographic groups. These increases were not uniform, though, and several groups fared notably worse than others. Repetitive chronic absenteeism spiked the most for female students (42 percent increase), English language learners (50 percent increase), students who are eligible to receive free or reduced price lunch (58 percent increase), and Black students (67 percent increase).

It is also important to note that while repetitive chronic absenteeism rates did not increase as sharply for other demographic groups, many of these groups—particularly Hispanic, White, and exceptional education students—had among the highest overall rates of repetitive chronic absenteeism in the 2021-22 school year.

Figure 4: Percentage of Repetitively Chronically Absent Students, by Demographic Subgroup and Cohort Year

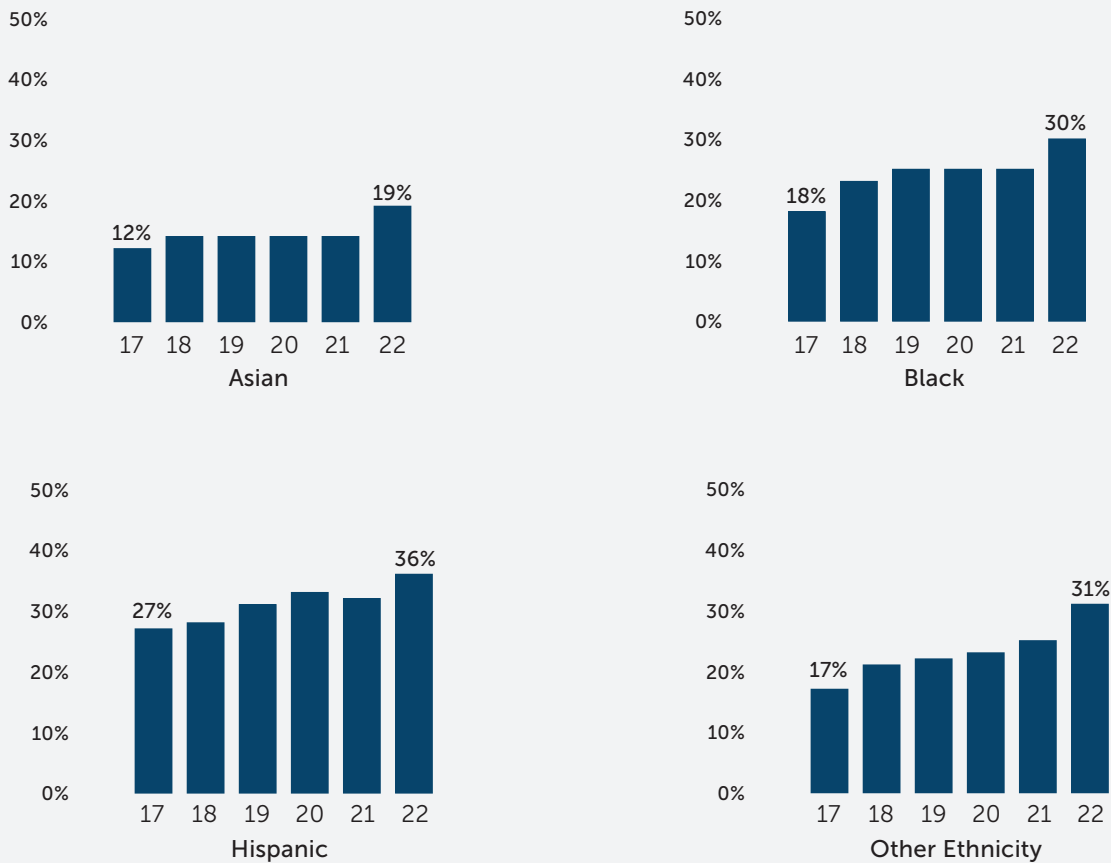






Figure 4: Percentage of Repetitively Chronically Absent Students, by Demographic Subgroup and Cohort Year



### What relationships exist between chronic absenteeism and student academic performance?

To analyze the relationship between chronic absenteeism and academic performance in high school, the CFEED research team categorized students in one of four groups based on their projected postsecondary readiness. These groups are predicated on performance in commonly taken accelerated courses.

**Expected or Probable:** Ready for postsecondary coursework

**Approaching or Beginning:** Not yet ready for postsecondary coursework

**Figure 5: Postsecondary Readiness Group Performance in Accelerated Courses**

Postsecondary Readiness Level	Expected		Probable		Approaching		Beginning	
	Accelerated Course Attempts*	Avg GPA	Accelerated Course Attempts*	Avg GPA	Accelerated Course Attempts*	Avg GPA	Accelerated Course Attempts*	Avg GPA
Averages	535	3.6	699	3.0	424	1.89	57	1.2

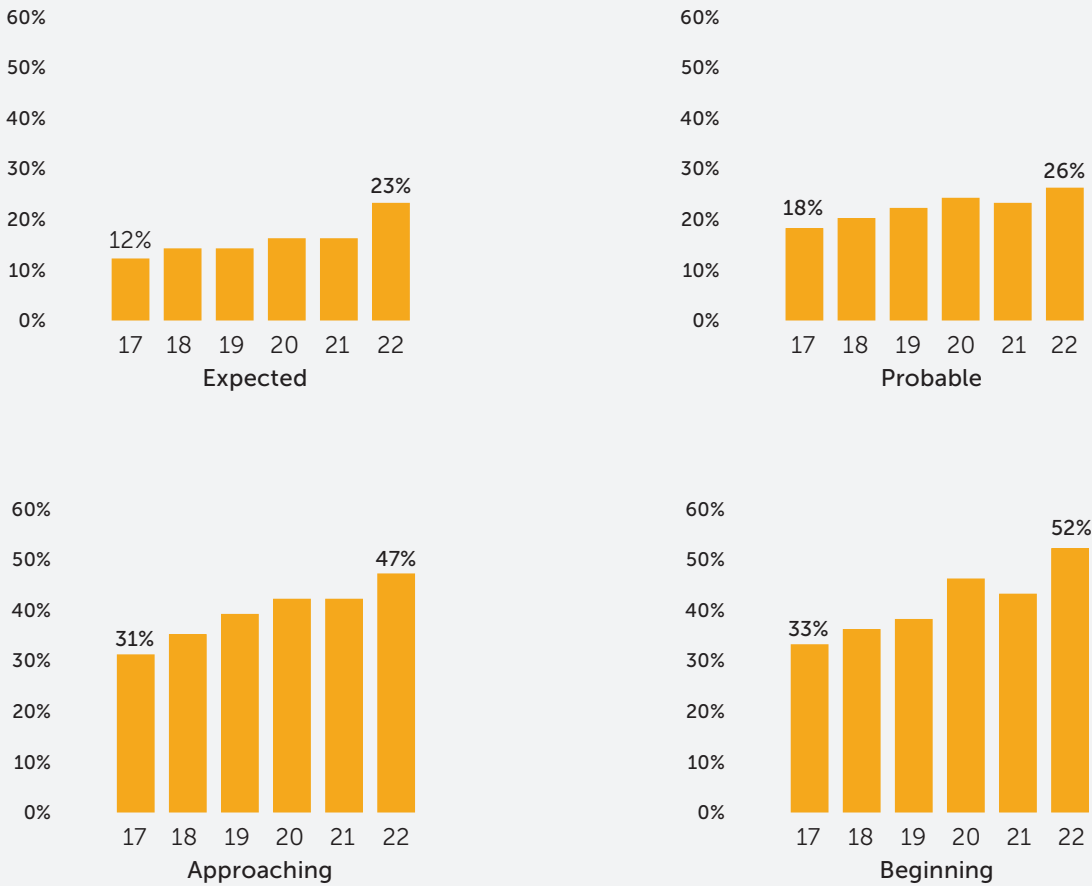
\*Attempts refers to the overall number of accelerated courses the students in each readiness group took.

The analysis indicates a clear relationship between chronic absenteeism and low academic performance. Among students whose postsecondary readiness was categorized as Approaching or Beginning, approximately one-third of these students in the 2017 cohort were repetitively chronically absent. For the 2022 cohort, that figure is closer to 50 percent. Figure 6 shows the percentage of students in each postsecondary readiness group—separated by cohort—who were chronically absent.





Figure 6: Percent of Repetitively Chronically Absent Students, by Postsecondary Readiness Group and Cohort Year



### What relationships exist between chronic absenteeism and college matriculation?

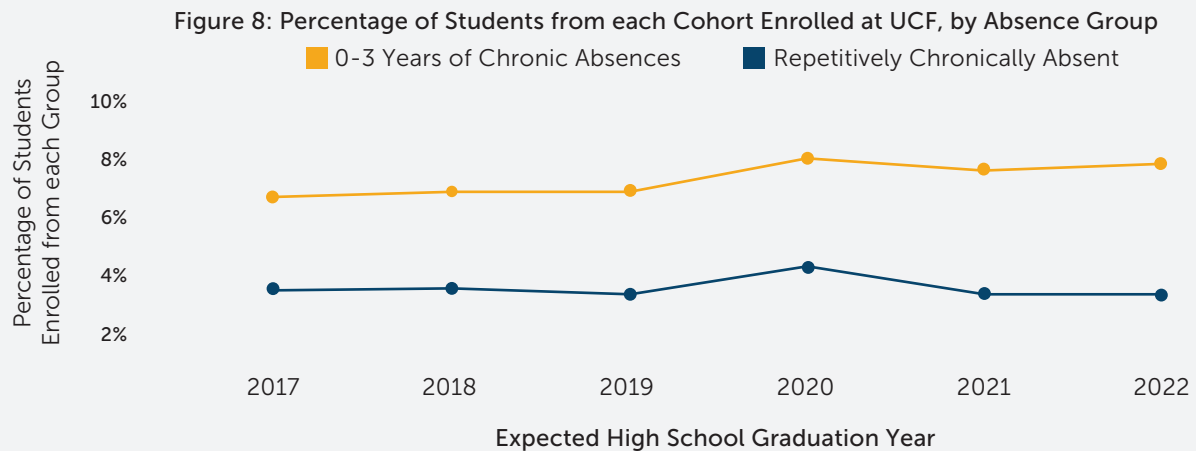
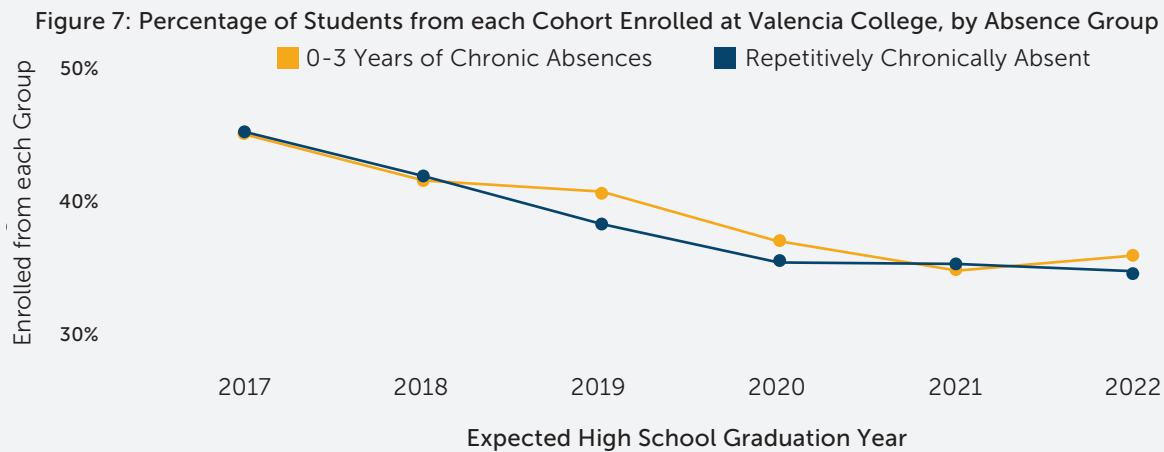
To examine the relationship between chronic absenteeism and college matriculation, CFEED tracked the percentages of students from Osceola County and Orange County who matriculated to Valencia College and the University of Central Florida (UCF).

Since Valencia College is an open-access school, students can generally begin taking classes regardless of high school performance or attendance. The CFEED analysis indicates no clear difference in matriculation rates among students who were repetitively chronically absent and those who were not. It is evident, though, that there has been an overall decline in Valencia College enrollment from 2017 to 2022, consistent with broader community college enrollment declines in the Florida College System and across the country.





At UCF, the relationship between chronic absenteeism and matriculation is clearer. Students with fewer K-12 absences matriculated at more than double the rate of students who were repetitively chronically absent. Among the 2017 to 2022 cohorts, matriculation rates have ranged from 7-8 percent for students with 0-3 years of chronic absences. By comparison just 3-4 percent of students who were repetitively chronically absent matriculated to UCF.





## Implications for Policy and Practice

As these findings demonstrate, too many high school students in Central Florida are chronically absent year after year. Repetitive absenteeism is cumulative, and, as a robust body of research suggests, likely to lead to further absenteeism. In turn, this spiral of missed days and lost instructional time leads to diminished learning and outcomes for students. In schools where absenteeism reaches high levels, the learning environment suffers. Urgency is paramount in addressing this challenge. Every school year represents an irreplaceable opportunity for each student. We can take important steps toward reducing chronic absenteeism and building a culture that recognizes and affirms the value of school attendance.

## Recommendations for Reducing Chronic Absenteeism

**Build awareness and understanding of chronic absenteeism, the challenges it presents, and its impacts.** It is not always the case that administrators, educators, and families are fully aware of absenteeism, either its severity or its academic implications. Absences, at the individual level and the school level, can add up quietly, and families and guardians especially may not recognize how many days their students have missed. Efforts to ensure that the district and school communities are attuned to the importance of attendance, factors that contribute to absenteeism, and the consequences of missing too many school days are vital to ensuring that good attendance is a priority this year and every year.





**Establish practical, reliable systems to monitor attendance patterns and absenteeism trends, both annually and year-over-year.** Early warning systems, with absence thresholds that are lower than the statewide threshold for chronic absenteeism, can help to identify students who are at risk of being chronically absent. Additionally, tracking cumulative absenteeism from year to year—the total days a student misses in their K-12 journey—can help to identify students who may not be chronically absent, but are nonetheless missing too much school and likely to experience diminished learning outcomes as a result.

**Celebrate and replicate school, grade, and classroom-level attendance successes.** There are numerous factors that influence absenteeism, such that it can be challenging for schools and districts to counteract. This is particularly true in the context of a school environment, in which attendance rates have not recovered to their pre-pandemic norms and, in fact, have grown worse. Intentional efforts to identify local successes in reducing chronic absenteeism, whether in a single school or classroom, can help districts learn and develop strategies for increasing attendance and supporting students at risk of missing too much school.

Ultimately, schools and districts cannot solve the problem of chronic absenteeism alone. Chronic absenteeism is a systemic challenge and a culture challenge. It requires a comprehensive response from policymakers, district leaders, school administrators and teachers, families and communities, and, importantly, students. With the targeted supports, at all levels, and continued attention to absenteeism patterns, collectively we can help to ensure that more students are engaged, and re-engaged, and consistently attending school.



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