

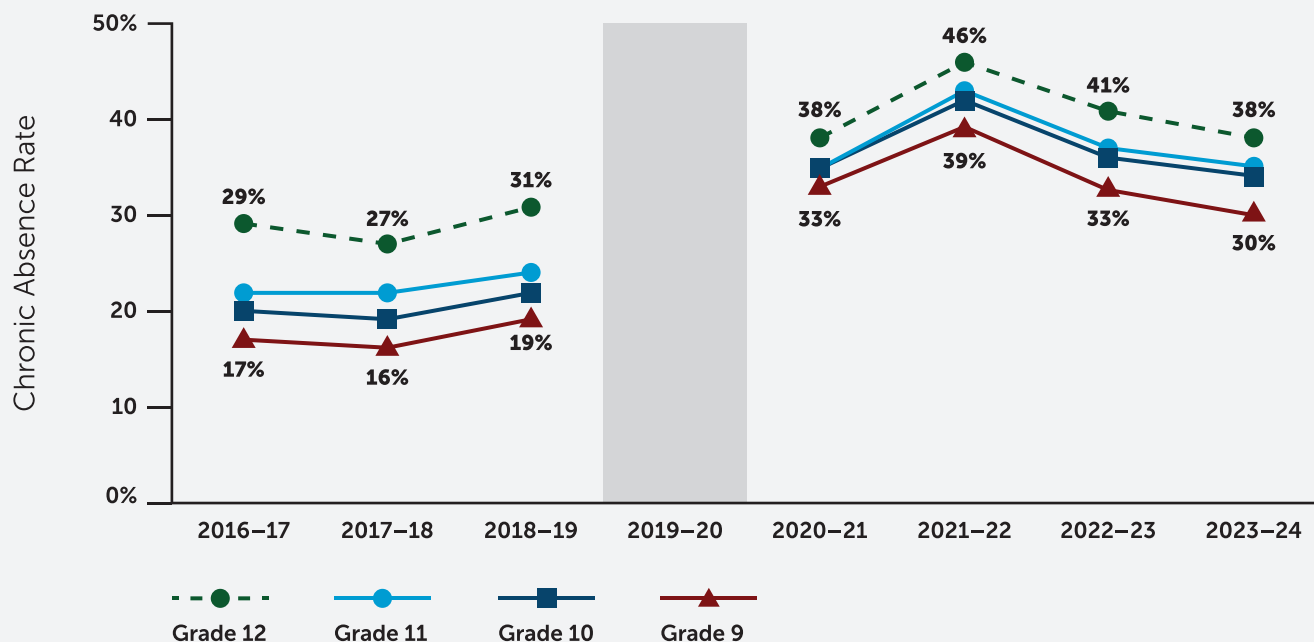
Missing Too Much High School

An Analysis of Arizona Chronic Absence Trends in Grades 9–12

Chronic absence among Arizona high school students has emerged as a critical issue, with rates peaking during the COVID-19 pandemic and remaining significantly higher than pre-pandemic levels. This research brief, conducted by Helios Education Foundation and WestEd, examines high school chronic absence trends from 2016-17 to 2023-24 and highlights disparities across student groups and school contexts while offering actionable recommendations to address the issue.

This is particularly relevant because the Arizona Department of Education (ADE) does not calculate chronic absenteeism for grades 9–12. The absence of these data leaves an important gap in understanding the transition from middle to high school, a gap our study is designed to close. The state relies on dropout rates as a proxy for disengagement at the high school level, due to the complexities of standardizing attendance data across local education agencies (LEAs). Our analysis addresses this limitation by applying ADE's definition of chronic absenteeism, traditionally used for grades 1–8, to grades 9–12 as well.

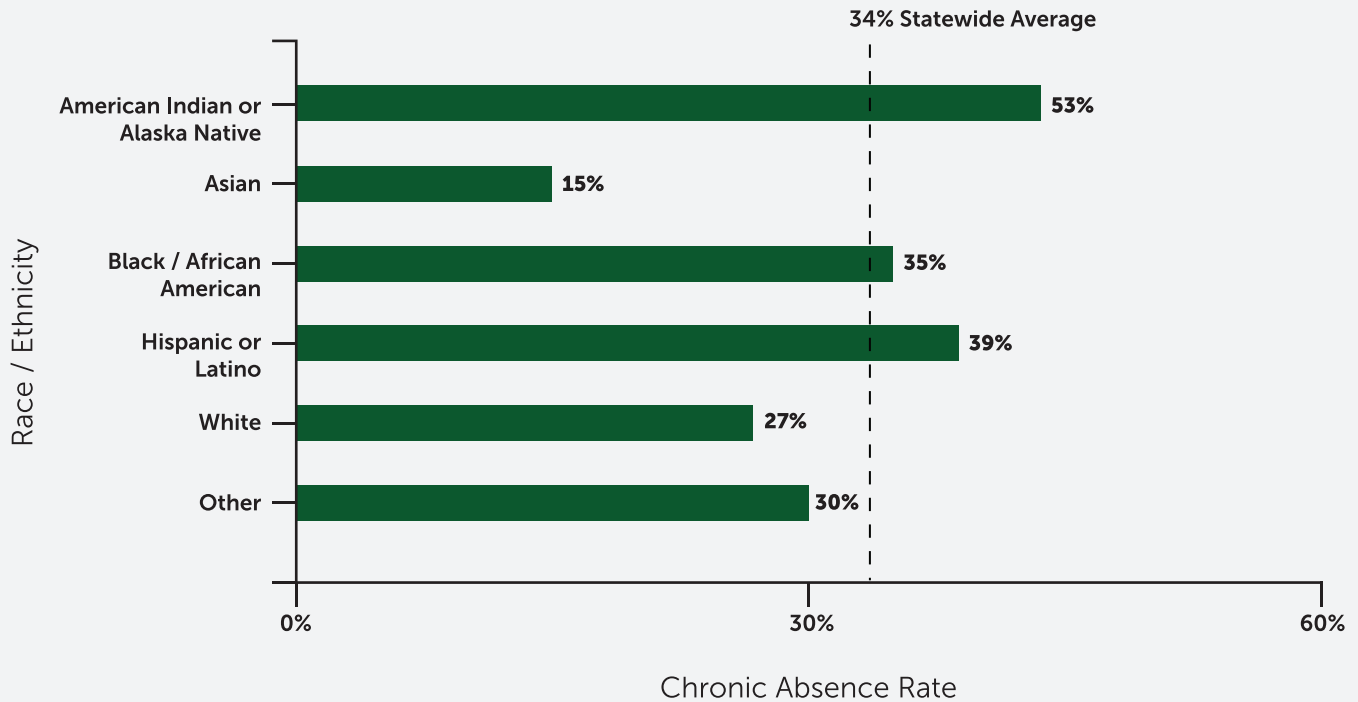
High School Chronic Absence Rates by Grade, 2016-17 through 2023-24



Source: Authors' analysis based on Arizona Department of Education data.

Note: The number of students per grade from school years 2016-17 through 2023-24 is reported in Appendix Exhibit B1. Data are not presented for 2019-20 due to mid-year changes in attendance reporting requirements.

High School Chronic Absence Rates, by Race/Ethnicity, 2023-24



Source: Authors' analysis based on Arizona Department of Education data.

Note: The number of students per student characteristic in 2023-24 is reported in Appendix Exhibit B2. Students identified as Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, Multiple Races, and with Unknown race/ethnicity data were combined into the category Other because of small cell sizes.

Key Findings

Statewide Trends: Chronic absence rates among high school students are significantly higher than in earlier grades. High school rates rose from 21-24% before the pandemic to 42% in 2021-22, then declined to 34% in 2023-24. Despite some improvements, rates remain 10 percentage points higher than pre-pandemic levels.

Grade-Level Patterns: Chronic absence increases steadily across grades, with grade 12 students consistently showing the highest rates.

Disparities by Student Characteristics:

- Economically disadvantaged students (43%) and English language learners (47%) face higher chronic absence rates.
- American Indian or Alaska Native students (53%) and Hispanic or Latino students (39%) are disproportionately affected.
- Students with disabilities (40%) and those with lower academic proficiency in English Language Arts and mathematics are more likely to be chronically absent

School Context:

- Schools with high concentrations of economically disadvantaged students report chronic absence rates of 40%, compared to 25% in lower-poverty schools.
- Charter schools have lower chronic absence rates (26%) compared to non charter schools (36%).
- Arizona Online Instruction (AOI) students consistently show higher chronic absence rates than their in person peers.

Recommendations

Early High School Intervention: Implement freshman-year supports, such as mentoring and personalized attendance monitoring, to prevent early disengagement.

Integrate Attendance Data: Use attendance tracking in academic intervention systems to identify and support at-risk students.

Community Partnerships: Partner with transportation providers, healthcare organizations, and social services to address barriers like unreliable transit and family instability.

Promote Attendance Culture: Shift the narrative from compliance to connection by celebrating strong attendance and fostering inclusive school environments.

Conclusion

Chronic absence has far-reaching consequences, including lower academic performance, higher dropout rates, and reduced opportunities in adulthood. Addressing this issue requires coordinated efforts at the state, district, and school levels to ensure equitable progress for all students.