



# Research Brief: Rates of Chronic Student Absence Doubled Following the Pandemic

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August 2023

*This is the first in a series of research briefs by REA on the topic of chronic absence. Future reports will examine effects on academic outcomes, demographic trends, causes of increased chronic absence, and recommended interventions.*

The purpose of this initial brief is to characterize the overall current state of chronic absence across the U.S., within Georgia, and among metro Atlanta school districts. Chronic absence refers to a student missing a critical amount of schooling. In most states, including Georgia, it is defined as missing 10% or more of enrolled days—18 days or more in a typical 180-day school year. Chronic absence is frequently used as an early warning indicator because it is associated with a wide variety of negative academic and behavioral outcomes, including lower performance on standardized tests and increased chances of dropping out. Following the pandemic, there has been growing concern over a widespread, substantial, and persistent trend of increased chronic absenteeism.

## Key Take-Aways

**Chronic absence rates doubled nearly everywhere in SY22.**

Chronic absence rates in 2022 were roughly two times higher than in 2019. This is a highly consistent finding nationally, across Georgia, and within the metro Atlanta region.

**The increase in chronic absence rates likely persisted in SY23.**

Early evidence suggests that high chronic absence rates persisted in 2023, both within and outside of GCPS.

**More research is needed.**

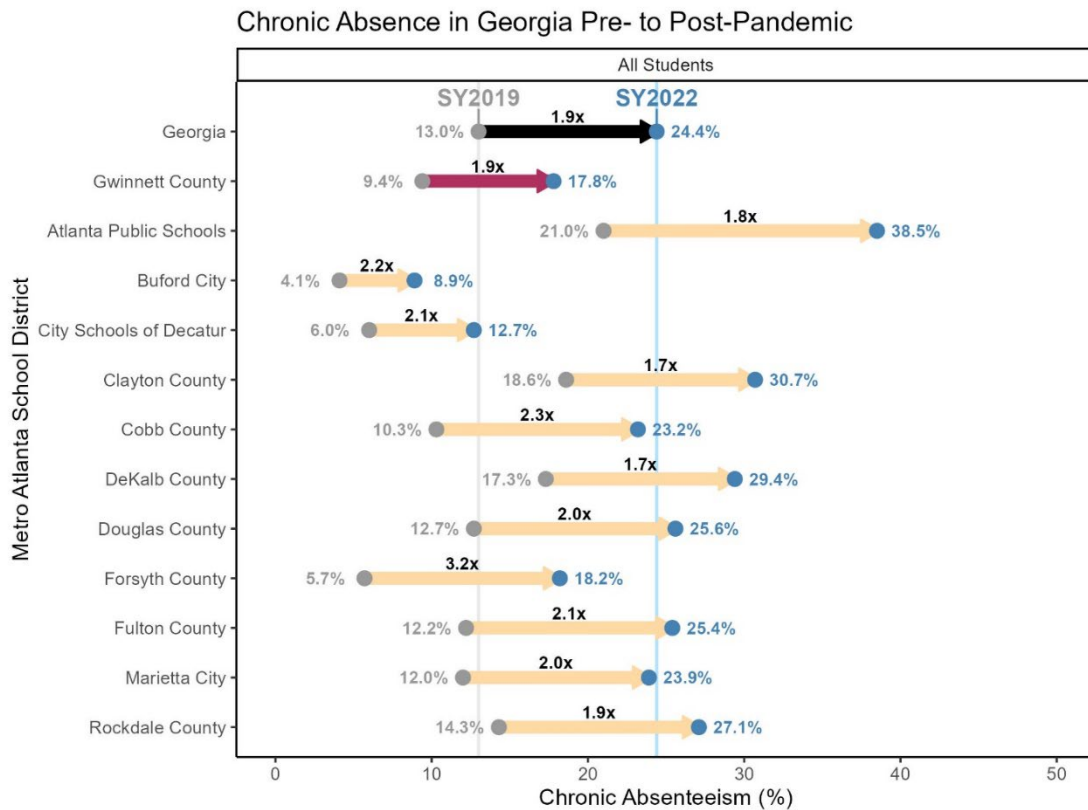
Recent, substantial rises in chronic absence appear to have no single, simple explanation. More research is needed to understand what will be required to return to—and improve beyond—pre-pandemic levels.

## Is chronic absence higher across the nation?

States vary in their operational definitions and reporting practices related to attendance<sup>1</sup>, making it difficult to directly compare chronic absence across state lines. But consistency within states' processes in recent years and strong uniformity in definitions allows for a reasonable picture of how chronic absence has changed nationally since the start of the pandemic. The Washington Post recently published an [analysis](#)<sup>2</sup> comparing state-level 2022 chronic absence rates to pre-pandemic levels. In all 41 states included in their analysis, the percentage of students chronically absent went up following the pandemic. In some states, such as Minnesota, Oklahoma, and West Virginia, the reported rates increased by one to two percentage points. At the other extreme, reported rates for Idaho and Alaska were over six times higher. But in most states, the trend was an approximate doubling in chronic absence. More specifically, 32 of the 41 states had increased chronic absence rates in the range of 1.5 to 2.6 times their pre-pandemic levels, with an overall average across states of a 1.9 times increase.

## Do we see similar trends in Georgia, metro Atlanta, and Gwinnett?

The Governor's Office of Student Achievement (GOSA) reports the official chronic absence rate for Georgia's school districts. Highly consistent with the national picture, our own analysis of GOSA's attendance data also revealed patterns of substantially increased chronic absence across Georgia and metro Atlanta districts. Comparing rates for 2022 to 2019, in almost all metro Atlanta districts there was a near doubling in chronic absence, ranging from 1.7 to 2.3 times higher than pre-pandemic rates.



*Vertical lines represent Georgia statewide Chronic Absence percentages for pre- and post-pandemic school years (gray = SY2019, blue = SY2022). Values above horizontal bars indicate the factor by which chronic absenteeism increased over this period (i.e., SY2022 / SY2019), rounded to the nearest tenth.*

The only exception was Forsyth County Schools, which saw a more than threefold increase in their chronic absence rate during this time frame. Relative to other metro Atlanta systems, GCPS has one of the lowest overall rates of chronic absence both currently and historically (GCPS ranked 4<sup>th</sup> out of 12 metro Atlanta districts in 2019 and 3<sup>rd</sup> in 2022), however GCPS' chronic absence rates also doubled to a historically unprecedented high of 17.8% in 2022. This means that close to 1 in 5 GCPS students missed a critical amount of school in 2022, compared with 1 in 10 GCPS students prior to the pandemic. The increase translates to roughly 15,000 more GCPS students per year experiencing chronic absence across the district. Future analyses by Research, Evaluation, & Analytics (REA) will investigate patterns of absence within our system (e.g., by education level, demographics, seasonality).

### **Are increases like this unusual?**

Widespread change of this magnitude within just a few years is far from normal. Georgia first began reporting the chronic absence rate in 2018, allowing for an estimate of the typical baseline and year-to-year stability of chronic absence before the pandemic\*. From 2018 to 2019 the statewide chronic absence rate remained stable, going from 13.1% to 13.0%. As of 2022, the rate nearly doubled to 24.4%. This increase is equivalent to roughly 215,000 *more* students per year across the state experiencing chronic absence. This means that about 1 in every 4 students in Georgia missed a critical amount of school in 2022, at a time when [experts warned](#) that extreme efforts would be required to make up for significant pandemic-related learning disruptions<sup>3</sup>.

*\*Prior to 2018, GOSA reported the percentage of students absent 15+ days. Although not the same metric as chronic absence, these data go back to 2011 and provide additional support for the general stability of absence rates from year to year. From 2011 to 2017 the 15+ days rate changed statewide, on average,  $\pm 1.0$  percentage points from one year to the next year.*

### **Has chronic absence begun to improve?**

Preliminary evidence suggests that these troubling increases in chronic absence persisted through the 2022-23 school year as well. Although official rates for 2022-23 are not yet available across the country, Attendance Works<sup>1</sup> cites evidence from Connecticut as a good source for reliable, early data because chronic absence rates there are reported monthly throughout the school year. The 2022-23 state-wide chronic absence rate of 21.0% for Connecticut, although slightly lower than in 2021-22 (23.7%), was still 1.7 times higher than the state's 12.2% pre-pandemic rate<sup>5</sup>. Georgia's official chronic absence rate for 2023-23 will not be released until later this fall. But our review of GCPS's internally calculated rate<sup>†</sup> suggests similar patterns occurred locally. Based on the district-wide rate, not only did chronic absenteeism continue at unusually high levels but it also continued to rise by 2.6 percentage points, going from 16.9% in 2021-22 to 19.5% in 2022-23. Although we do not know yet whether such trends are continuing into 2023-24, REA intends to investigate early patterns in the current school year in September and October because prior work conducted elsewhere<sup>6</sup> and at GCPS has shown that absence rates within the first 30 days of school are highly predictive of end-of-year rates.

*† These values are currently available on the GCPS School Profile and are calculated using internal data sources and methods identical to the calculation of the District KPI.*

## Why are so many more students missing so much school?

To know what must be done to return student attendance rates to pre-pandemic levels, we need to understand what is causing this recent phenomenon. But chronic absence has always been a complex issue. There are many reasons why students miss school, and research shows that high absenteeism is more often a *signal* of academic problems than the *reason* behind them<sup>4</sup>. Missing a lot of school can certainly have a direct impact on a student's learning, but it can often also be a sign of deeper underlying problems such as disengagement, issues with peers, and difficulties at home. The recent substantial rise in chronic absence appears to also have no single, simple explanation. More research is needed, but early evidence from pandemic-era research and journalists' field reporting suggests a variety of potential causes. We know, for instance, that clinically elevated anxiety and depression symptoms among youth doubled globally during the pandemic<sup>9</sup>, and journalistic reporting on the perceptions of parents and educators suggests that mental health is one of the reasons many students are struggling with the return to attending school regularly<sup>10</sup>. Other recent reporting highlights broad societal shifts in terms of parents' behavior and perceptions, such as heightened anxiety about illness and changes in notions about the relative importance of regular school attendance<sup>11</sup>. To unpack such complexities and to develop the clearest understanding of what GCPS can do to reduce chronic absence, REA is engaging in several studies on this topic. These studies will be published as research briefs like this one and will examine (1) effects of chronic absence on academic outcomes, (2) patterns in chronic absence (e.g., demographic, seasonal), (3) reasons behind this phenomenon, and (4) recommended solutions. Briefs will be posted to the [REA SharePoint site](#) as they become available.

### References:

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