

# Chronic absenteeism: Pay now, or pay later

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The number of kids chronically absent from our schools statewide is staggering! Unfortunately, most of us in the state, including our Legislature, may not realize just how significant this crisis is and how costly it will be if we don't address it now.

After the pandemic, most people expected the extremely high chronic absenteeism rate to drop back to the pre-pandemic levels at 18.8%, which was more than 25% higher than the national average. While there has been a reduction in chronic absenteeism, it continues to remain very high at 25.9%.

Just let that sink in: One out of four kids misses school at an unacceptable rate. Most of us are not alarmed or even aware that more than 120,000 kids in our state are chronically absent. More frightening are the long-term fiscal impacts detailed in a recent Applied Analysis report, "the cumulative lifetime costs of chronic absenteeism for the next 20 graduating classes in the Clark County School District are estimated to reach \$14.4 billion by 2044." *This will total more than \$20 billion statewide.*

**What is chronic absenteeism?** Some people are under the mistaken impression that chronic absenteeism is a politically correct way to describe truancy — when, in fact, the two terms refer to different aspects of student absenteeism. Truancy generally refers to unexcused absences, which typically lead to a focus on compliance with the rules. Chronic absenteeism, however, incorporates all absences: excused, unexcused, and suspensions. Students are considered chronically absent when they miss 10 percent (about one month) of the school year for any reason, and severely chronically absent when they miss 20% (one day a week) or more. Regardless of the reason, if they are not in the classroom, they cannot learn. If they do not learn, they do not graduate and often drop out of school.

**Dropping out of school can be the equivalent of dropping out of life.** Data shows that being chronically absent in preschool makes a child much less likely to be able to read at grade level by second grade, and they are four times more likely to drop out of school than their peers. Another study reported that even a single year of chronic absenteeism in high school resulted in *a sevenfold increase in the likelihood of dropping out*. Dropping out of school leads to lower-paying jobs and less job stability. A high school dropout's lifetime income is half that of a high school graduate. This can lead to a cycle of poverty for their kids and homelessness. In addition, dropouts are more likely to commit crimes and be victims of crime. Chronically absent students are 12 times as likely to commit a serious assault and 21 times as likely to commit a serious property crime. (Henry & Huizinga, 2005).

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**Why is chronic absenteeism occurring now at such high rates?** The rates were already trending up before the pandemic, but during the pandemic, many parents and students changed their view of education from mandatory to optional. The root causes of chronic absenteeism are vast. Poverty, illness, lack of childcare, lack of health care, food insecurity, transportation and social services remain contributors to poor attendance. However, this is not just a parent or school district issue; WCSD and CCSD aggressively work to mitigate the barriers students face in attendance. Unfortunately, the need greatly exceeds the resources of the school districts and many of our families. This is why chronic absenteeism is a state and community challenge, which requires a coordinated effort and investment by the community and the state.

**The Applied Analysis Report details the fiscal impacts of chronic absenteeism:** There are seven factors Applied Analysis used in determining the long-term costs of chronic absenteeism. They are:

- High school-level degree and productivity differences
- Postsecondary educational attainment and productivity differences
- Decreased tax revenue for state and local governments
- Increased likelihood of incarceration and associated costs
- Increased likelihood of housing insecurity and associated costs
- Increased likelihood of Medicaid use and associated costs
- Increased likelihood of reliance on social support and associated costs

The report also states, “In addition to the seven factors quantified and directly addressed in this analysis, numerous other factors have been researched and documented as being associated with chronic absenteeism. These factors span economic, fiscal, and social domains.”

**Pay now or pay much more later.** A great deal of unfunded effort by the school districts and partner nonprofits has helped improve attendance. Unfortunately, it has been more than two years since the pandemic, and our 25.9% chronic absenteeism rate sends a clear message that we must do more. It is fiscally irresponsible not to address this now, while the cost is manageable, given the immense long-term fiscal costs for our state and our community (laid out in the Applied Analysis Report), not to mention the hundreds of thousands of lives that will be lost to poverty. A recent Northern Nevada community task force identified 14 areas that would greatly assist families and schools in reducing chronic absenteeism. At the top of the list was providing a trusted adult in each school, like the site coordinators offered by Community in Schools, and offering needed resources to families, like those the Family Resource Centers provide. *Both efforts are grossly underfunded.* As we work through the legislative session and our local government budget cycles, we must consider an investment in our kids now, which will pay us huge dividends in the future.

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*Mike Kazmierski is the executive director of Strengthen our Community. Strengthen our Community, in conjunction with our many partners, is in the process of raising private funds to address the urgent funding needs for our Family Resource Centers. For more information, please contact Rachel Tatro at [rachel@theblueprintcollaborative.com](mailto:rachel@theblueprintcollaborative.com).*