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The State of Chronic Absenteeism

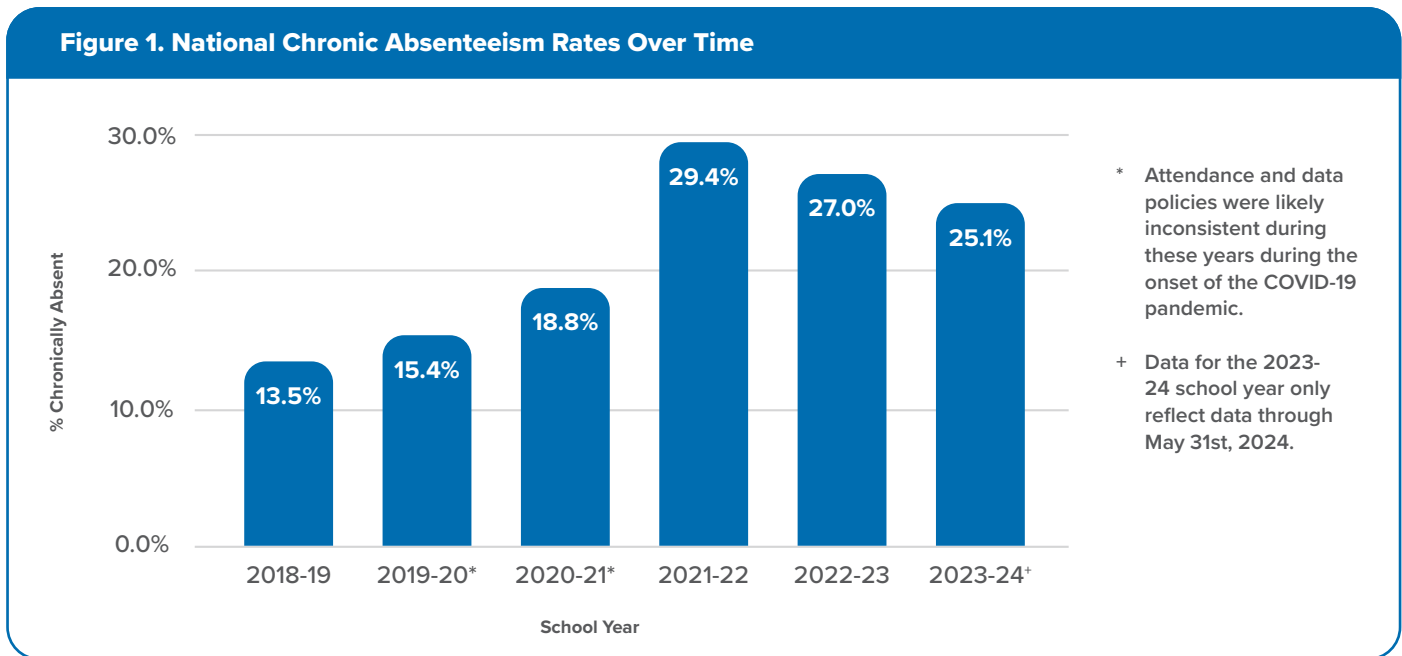## What Millions of Students Tell Us About School Climate

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Introduction and Background

Chronic absenteeism, defined as missing 10% or more of school days, has notably increased since the COVID-19 pandemic. **In fact, annual chronic absenteeism rates—reflected in Panorama's own data—nearly doubled from 2018-19 to 2023-24.**

Figure 1. National Chronic Absenteeism Rates Over Time

School Year	% Chronically Absent
2018-19	13.5%
2019-20*	15.4%
2020-21*	18.8%
2021-22	29.4%
2022-23	27.0%
2023-24+	25.1%

* Attendance and data policies were likely inconsistent during these years during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

+ Data for the 2023-24 school year only reflect data through May 31st, 2024.

This escalation, described as both a "crisis" and the "new normal", has made chronic absenteeism a high priority for researchers, advocates, trade unions, state legislators, and, of course, school and district leaders.

While the root causes of chronic absenteeism are hard to identify, its negative impacts are well-documented. Students who are chronically absent:

- Tend to perform worse on standardized tests
- Are more likely to drop out
- Often face challenges later in life, including unemployment (see Liu & Lee, 2022)

Research shows that, after teachers, **school leaders have the largest impacts on student outcomes, including reducing absenteeism** (Grissom et al., 2021; Leithwood et al., 2004).

That's why Panorama Education's Data Science and Applied Research Team completed an extensive study on the state of chronic absenteeism—to uncover what school and district leaders can do to address it. Using Panorama's unique national data, we've analyzed the complete attendance information for over 7,000 schools and 11 million student records. We aimed to answer the following questions:

1. **Does the school a student attends relate to the probability of being chronically absent?**
2. **Using student survey data of more than 30 topics, what topics administered in the fall correlated with end-year chronic absenteeism?**

Here's a summary of what we found:

Key Findings:

- **The school that a student attends matters to absenteeism.** Controlling for student attributes and learning needs, as well as school poverty level, the school attended still influences the likelihood of a student being chronically absent by as much as 22%.

- **Specific survey topics correlate strongly with chronic absenteeism.** School safety and climate are most linked to absenteeism in elementary and middle schools, with social awareness most linked to absenteeism in high schools

In this report, we'll explore these key findings. We'll also provide specific, research-informed strategies that district and school leaders can implement to address some of these root causes of chronic absenteeism.

2.

The State of Chronic Absenteeism: Study Methodology

Using Panorama's unique national data, we are able to provide some broad context for the state of chronic absenteeism. With thousands of schools nationwide using Panorama's Surveys, **Panorama's reporting platform is based on a robust dataset of over one billion responses—the largest dataset of its kind.**

Turn your insights into better student outcomes
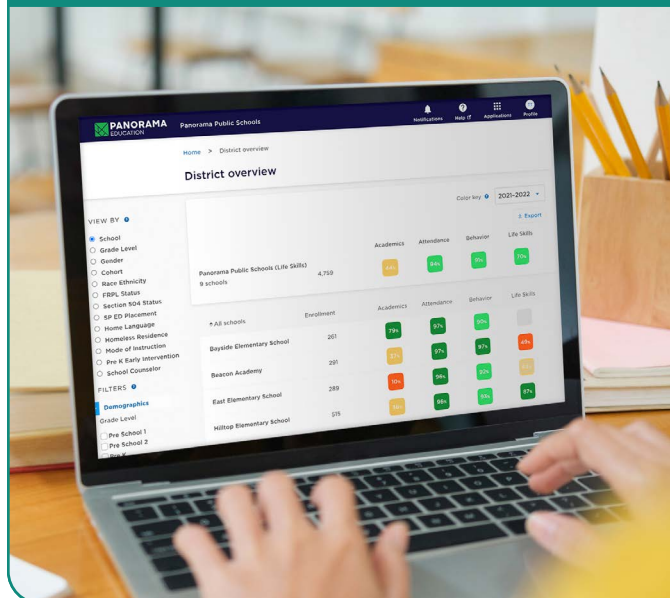
Thousands of schools nationwide use Panorama Student Success, the market-leading K-12 platform for helping districts translate insights into effective student supports. And millions of students have taken Panorama Surveys.

Panorama is the central place for districts to collect and analyze student, family, and teacher feedback on the factors that are critical to student achievement. With reliable, actionable feedback data, districts can address key issues like belonging, teacher-student relationships, engagement, and school safety.

Sample

This study is based on de-identified data from 3,116 schools and 1,734,870 students—**a subset of Panorama's unique data set of 7,000 schools and 11 million student records**. Schools were chosen for the sample if they had attendance and academic records for the 2021-22 and 2022-23 school years, and if their students completed Panorama's Student Survey for the 2021-22 and 2022-23 school years. Because Student Success can be customized and configured based on client needs, data were retained for schools with attendance and academic data that could feasibly be compared across school years.

The study included schools from 43 states in the Midwest, Northeast, South, and West regions of the United States. Almost 30% of schools were located in urban communities, roughly a third were in suburban (34%) communities, and the remaining 36% were located in towns and rural communities. The majority (53%) of the schools were elementary schools, 20% were middle schools, and 25% were high schools.

Panorama follows best practices for data privacy and security, including implementing technical, physical, and administrative safeguards to protect student information. To conduct this research, we removed all personally identifiable student information to ensure the privacy of our users. When school districts work with Panorama, districts own their data—not Panorama.

Survey Topics

We analyzed survey responses on 30 topics regarding student skills, school support, and well-being from Panorama's Feedback Surveys, focusing on 15 topics from fall 2022-23 surveys due to their strong link to chronic absenteeism. Our analysis revealed key patterns in the relationship between these topics and student attendance.

2.

Findings and
Key Insights

Does The School That a Student Attends Matter to Absenteeism?

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The short answer to this question is yes: the school a student attends relates to the probability of being chronically absent, even when controlling for student-specific attributes. **The probability that a student was chronically absent increased or decreased by as much as one-fifth based on the school attended.**

As expected, there were many student attributes that are significantly correlated with chronic absenteeism. For example:

- Students receiving special education services were 1.4 times more likely to be chronically absent than general education students.
- Pacific Islanders are over 2 times more likely to be chronically absent than their white peers.

In this study:

We controlled for these student characteristics and learning needs, as well as the school poverty level. Upon controlling for these characteristics, we found that factors within a school's locus of control, such as safety and engagement, **can influence a student's likelihood of being chronically absent by as much as 22%.**

In this report, we discuss our findings related to these key influencing factors, including school safety, self-management, and supportive relationships. We also provide **specific, research-informed strategies that district and school leaders can implement to address some of these root causes of chronic absenteeism.**

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We ran numerous correlations across topics and questions included in our survey content. There is an inverse relationship between how favorably students responded to topics on our surveys with the percentage of students chronically absent during the 2022-23 school year. This relationship varies by grade level *(as seen in Figure 3 on page 12)*.

In Elementary Schools

School safety has the strongest correlation with chronic absenteeism.

In Middle Schools

Both **school safety** and **positive feelings about the school environment** show moderate correlations with chronic absenteeism.

In High Schools

Social awareness, self-management, and supportive relationships are the topics most strongly linked to chronic absenteeism.

In elementary schools, the questions most correlated to chronic absenteeism focus on school safety, with the top four questions all focused on this issue. Eight out of the top ten questions are related to school safety and climate.

In middle schools, this pattern decreases, with only six out of the top ten questions related to these topics. Specifically, *physical* safety questions are more related to absences in elementary schools, while in middle schools, questions about positive feelings toward school and trusting relationships with adults rose to the top.

In high schools, questions about social awareness are the most related to frequent absences, making up six of the top ten.

(See figure 3 on the following page for the top ten questions most linked to end year chronic absenteeism rates by grade level.)

Top 10 Survey Questions Most Linked to Chronic Absenteeism

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A. Elementary Schools

Legend:
- School Climate
- Classroom Climate
- Self-Management
- School Safety

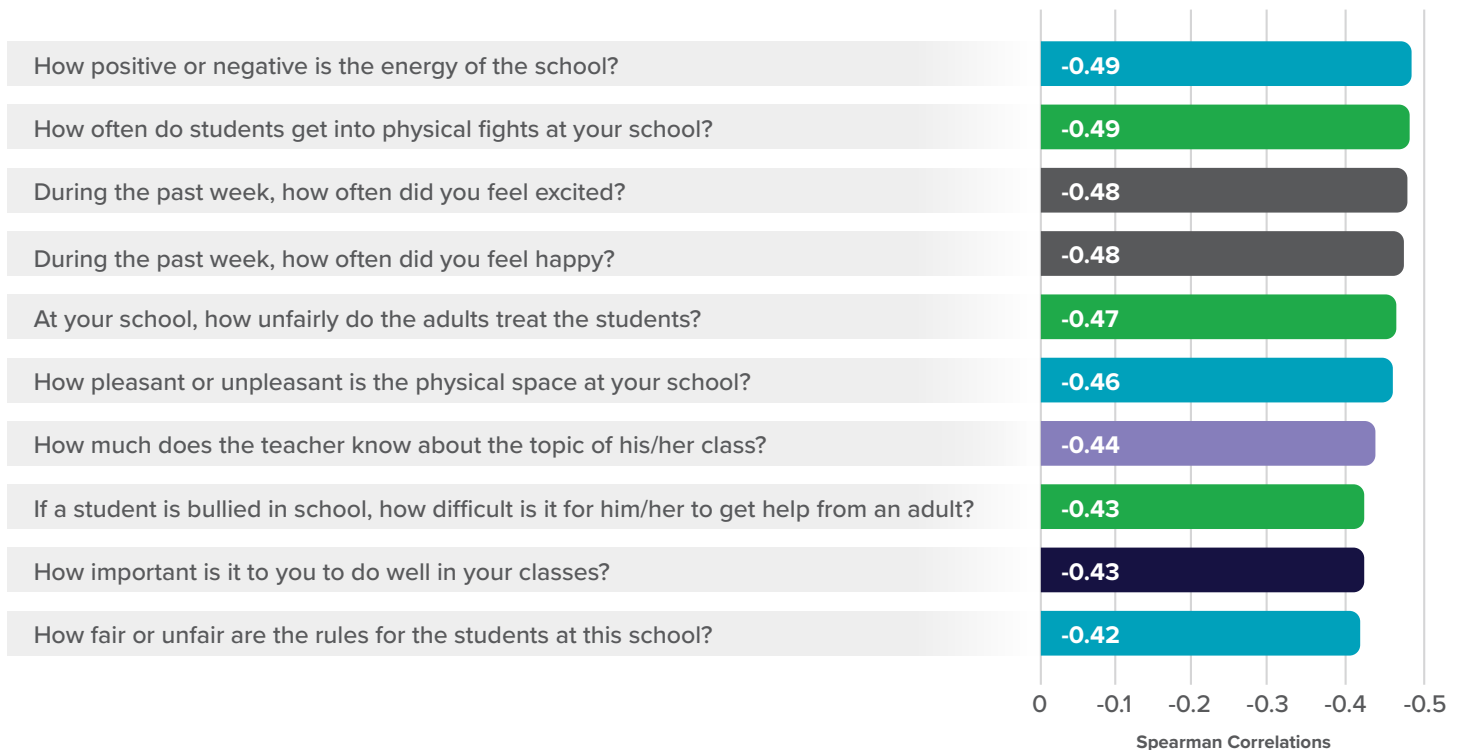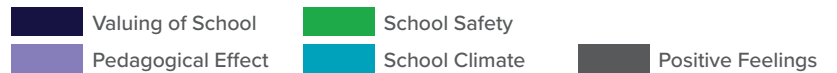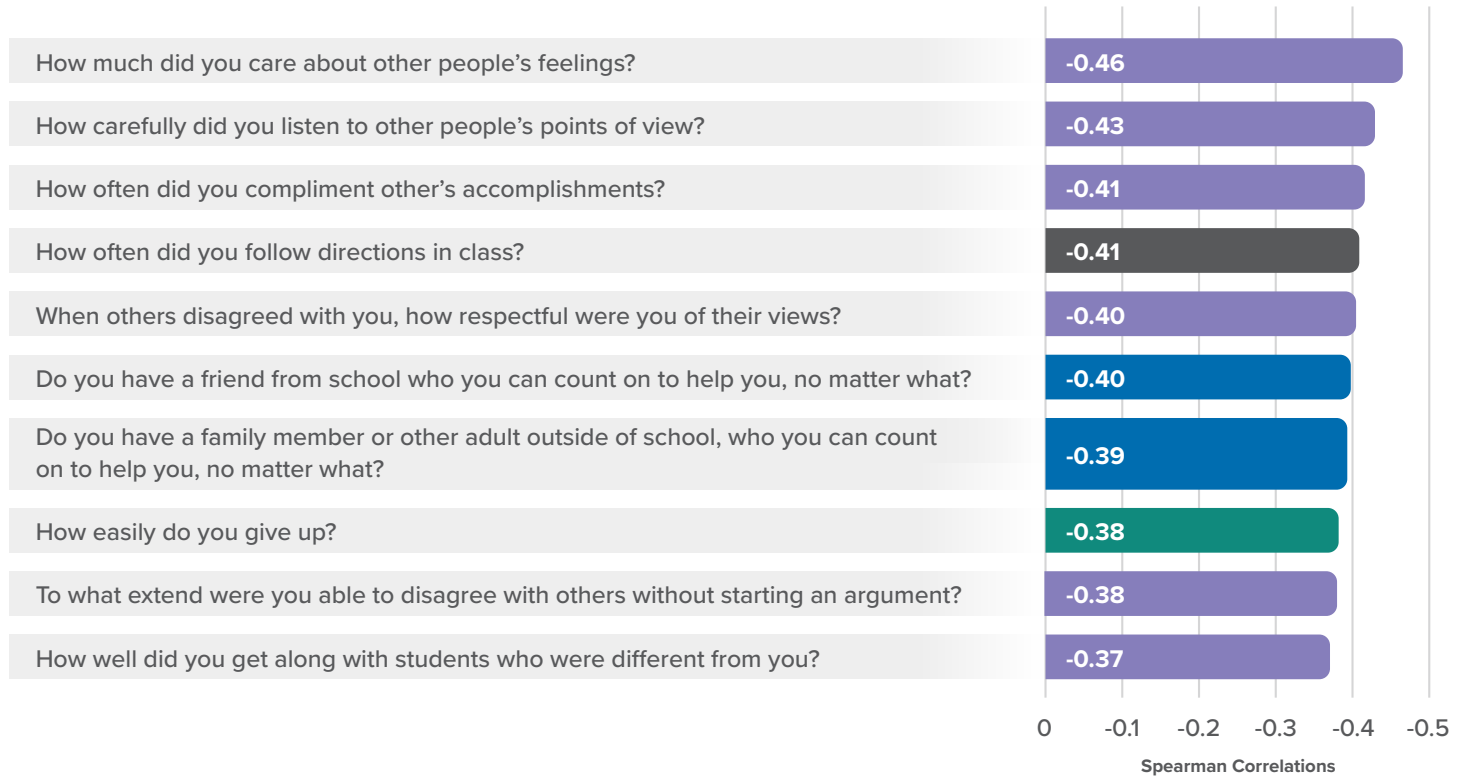| Question	Correlation
How often do you worry about violence at your school?	-0.55
How often do students get into physical fights at your school?	-0.51
If a student is bullied in school, how difficult is it for him/her to get help from an adult?	-0.49
How likely is it that someone from your school will bully you online?	-0.44
How often did you follow directions in class?	-0.43
How fair or unfair are the rules for the students in this class?	-0.43
How positive or negative is the energy of this class?	-0.42
How often are people disrespectful to others at your school?	-0.38
How positive or negative is the energy of the school?	-0.37
How often did you allow others to speak without interruption?	-0.36

0   -0.1   -0.2   -0.3   -0.4   -0.5   -0.6
Spearman Correlations

B. Middle School

Legend:
- Valuing of School
- Pedagogical Effect
- School Safety
- School Climate
- Positive Feelings

Question	Correlation
How positive or negative is the energy of the school?	-0.49
How often do students get into physical fights at your school?	-0.49
During the past week, how often did you feel excited?	-0.48
During the past week, how often did you feel happy?	-0.48
At your school, how unfairly do the adults treat the students?	-0.47
How pleasant or unpleasant is the physical space at your school?	-0.46
How much does the teacher know about the topic of his/her class?	-0.44
If a student is bullied in school, how difficult is it for him/her to get help from an adult?	-0.43
How important is it to you to do well in your classes?	-0.43
How fair or unfair are the rules for the students at this school?	-0.42

0   -0.1   -0.2   -0.3   -0.4   -0.5
Spearman Correlations

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Growth Mindset   **Social Awareness**
Self-Management   **Supportive Relationships**

C. High School

Question	Correlation
How much did you care about other people's feelings?	-0.46
How carefully did you listen to other people's points of view?	-0.43
How often did you compliment other's accomplishments?	-0.41
How often did you follow directions in class?	-0.41
When others disagreed with you, how respectful were you of their views?	-0.40
Do you have a friend from school who you can count on to help you, no matter what?	-0.40
Do you have a family member or other adult outside of school, who you can count on to help you, no matter what?	-0.39
How easily do you give up?	-0.38
To what extend were you able to disagree with others without starting an argument?	-0.38
How well did you get along with students who were different from you?	-0.37

0   -0.1   -0.2   -0.3   -0.4   -0.5

Spearman Correlations

The Most Important Topics Affecting Chronic Absenteeism

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In our final analysis, we look at "risk ratios" for each survey topic. This ratio is calculated by comparing the percentage of chronically absent students who rated a topic very low (the bottom quartile) with those who rated it very high (the top quartile). These ratios help provide the relative importance of each topic in anticipating chronic absenteeism.

From this analysis, we found that students who rated topics in the bottom quartile always had higher rates of chronic absenteeism than those in the top quartile. **This means students with the lowest ratings on these topics are much more likely to be chronically absent compared to students with the highest ratings.**

Topics with highest risk ratios by school level:

Comparing students in the lowest quartile to the highest quartile

Elementary Students:

- Those with low self-efficacy, self-management, and school safety ratings are 1.5 times more likely to be chronically absent.
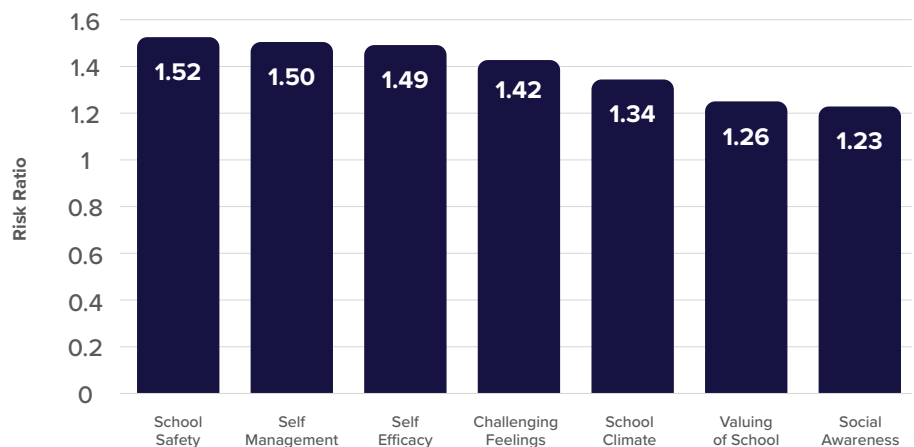
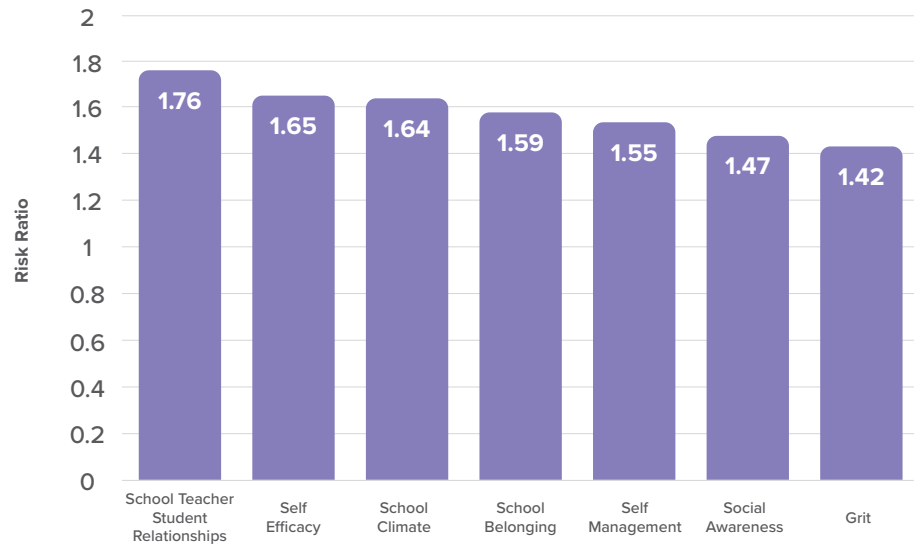

Middle School Students:

- Those with low self-efficacy ratings are 1.9 times more likely to be chronically absent.
- Those with low school climate and school engagement ratings are 1.8 times more likely to be chronically absent.
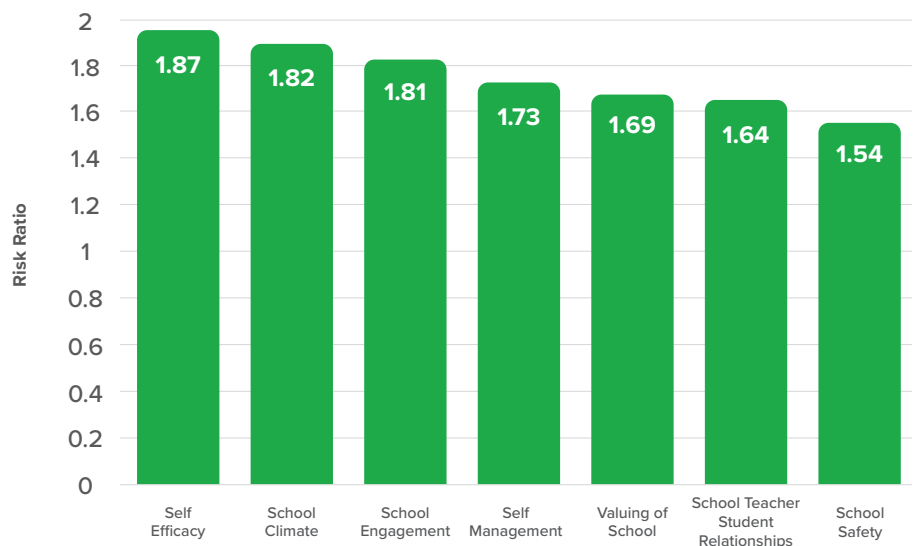
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The Most Important Topics Affecting Chronic Absenteeism

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High School Students:

- Those with poor relationships with teachers are 1.8 times more likely to be chronically absent.

- Those with low self-efficacy are 1.7 times more likely to be chronically absent.

- Those with low school climate are 1.6 times more likely to be chronically absent

Risk Ratio

Category	Value
School Teacher Student Relationships	1.76
Self Efficacy	1.65
School Climate	1.64
School Belonging	1.59
Self Management	1.55
Social Awareness	1.47
Grit	1.42

3.

Next Steps & Strategies for District Leaders

This study supports three key findings about chronic absenteeism:

- The probability of a student being chronically absent was, in part, a function of the school attended.
- Elementary and middle schools with a high reported level of concern around safety and low school climate were correlated with higher percentages of chronically absent students.
- High schools with low reported levels of social awareness were correlated with increased chronic absenteeism.

The next portion of this report will outline **specific, research-informed strategies that district and school leaders can implement to address some of these root causes of chronic absenteeism.**

This study shows that in elementary schools, the strongest link to chronic absenteeism is a low sense of school safety. For young students, concerns about physical safety are the main predictor of higher absenteeism rates. In middle schools, while school safety remains important, the focus shifts from physical safety to adults providing safe spaces.

To enhance school safety, different strategies are required for various age groups. Here are key actions for improving school safety, with strategies for each grade level:

Train staff on cultivating safe environments with trauma-informed practices

- Provide professional development for all school staff on trauma-informed practices.
- Focus on the impact of trauma on learning and behavior, signs of trauma, and strategies to create a safe and supportive environment in all learning spaces.
- Techniques may include maintaining predictable routines, using calming strategies, and fostering strong, positive relationships with students.

Implement bullying prevention programs

- Activities like role-playing, storytelling, and interactive games can help younger students understand the impact of bullying and develop positive social skills.
- Encourage open communication between students and teachers to promptly address any incidents.
- For secondary students, shift the focus to conflict resolution and social perspective-taking. Teach students how to navigate disagreements constructively and understand different viewpoints through workshops, peer mediation, and discussion groups.
- Encourage older students to take an active role in promoting a culture of respect and inclusion within the school.

Create designated safe spaces within the school building

- Provide students with safe spaces (calm space) and coping tools.
- Provide calm corners in elementary schools and counseling centers or mindfulness rooms for older students.

Conduct frequent check-ins to understand student needs

- Understanding student needs through frequent check-ins helps create a safer and more responsive school environment, reducing anxiety and encouraging regular attendance.
- Check-ins can be administered daily or weekly using tools such as Panorama Check-Ins, or more informal daily greetings and brief conversations with a teacher or school counselor.

Aligned with prior research (Gubbels et al., 2019; Hamlin, 2021), this study finds that chronic absenteeism is linked to low perceptions of school climate—especially for middle schools. For high schools, positive perceptions of relationships with teachers and peers are linked to lower chronic absenteeism.

As a district or school leader, consider the following ways to take action on this research to foster a positive school climate:

Facilitate a relationship mapping intervention across all campuses

- For students, a positive connection to at least one caring adult in their school is correlated with improved academic outcomes, reduced rates of bullying, enhanced social skills, and a greater sense of belonging.
- Relationship Mapping is a schoolwide intervention that helps educators systematically ensure that every student in their building has a strong, positive connection to at least one teacher or staff member.

Utilize evidence-based relationship-building strategies with at-risk students

- Check and Connect is an evidence-based intervention that involves assigning trained mentors to at-risk students. These mentors regularly monitor students' attendance, academic performance, and behavior.
- This form of personalized mentoring helps build strong relationships between students and mentors, providing continuous support and accountability that encourages regular attendance and engagement.

Establish attendance groups to scale support for chronically absent students

- Attendance groups are small, supportive peer groups led by a teacher or staff member where students with attendance issues can discuss their challenges and set goals. These groups foster a sense of community and provide a platform for students to support each other in improving their attendance.

Train school staff to adopt restorative practices

- Restorative practices focus on building a positive school culture through proactive relationship-building and conflict resolution strategies. These practices include restorative circles and peer mediation, both which aim to resolve conflicts, repair harm, and restore relationships.
- Adopt restorative practice approaches to address conflicts and build a supportive school community.
- Administrators may also consider providing training for teachers and staff on conducting restorative circles and mediations.

School engagement, self-management, and self-efficacy survey topics correlate with chronic absenteeism. These topics measure the extent to which students are attentive and invested in school, behaviors associated with school success, and their belief they can be successful in school.

Enhancing core programs with engaging curriculum & instruction that offers many chances for success can help improve student outcomes. Here are strategies to get students actively involved and connected at school—so they are more likely to attend regularly and succeed academically.

Embed life skills within core academic content

- Integrating emotional regulation, self-management, self-efficacy, social awareness, and resilience into core academic subjects helps students develop competencies needed to navigate challenges both in and out of the classroom.
- This approach not only makes learning more relevant, but also helps students build a strong foundation for personal and academic success, increasing engagement and attendance.

Develop peer mentoring programs

- Create peer mentoring programs where older students are paired with younger ones to provide guidance, support, and a positive role model.
- Peer mentors can help younger students get excited about school and learning through shared activities and collaborative projects. Older students can model positive attitudes towards education and provide guidance on navigating school life.
- These programs create a sense of community and enthusiasm for learning, making school a more appealing and engaging place for younger students.

Enhance student-centered instruction

- Adopt instructional strategies that prioritize active student participation and personalized learning. This can include group projects, hands-on activities, and discussions that cater to diverse learning styles and interests.
- By creating a more engaging and interactive classroom environment, students are more likely to feel connected to their learning and motivated to attend school regularly.

If your district is interested in surveying students to understand the root causes of absenteeism, our research shows that some survey topics are better than others.

School and district leaders should consider administering different survey topics to elementary, middle, and high school students. Consider utilizing survey items that can help anticipate possible chronic absenteeism at the school and individual level.

- **For elementary students,** we see strong evidence that school safety is a good indicator for possible chronic absenteeism issues.
- **For middle school students,** school safety continues to be an important indicator. However, other topics such as self-efficacy and school engagement also have strong relationships with chronic absenteeism.
- **For high school students,** topics such as student-teacher relationships, self-efficacy and school climate have strong relationships with chronic absenteeism.

With Panorama Student Success and Panorama Surveys and Feedback, you'll have a central place for school climate and student supports. Surveys give you a pulse on how your district community is feeling. Student Success bridges those insights with actionable tools for driving improvement across literacy, math, chronic absenteeism, and on-time graduation. Boost student outcomes by putting all this information into one system, and by developing interventions that are driven by both data and student voice.
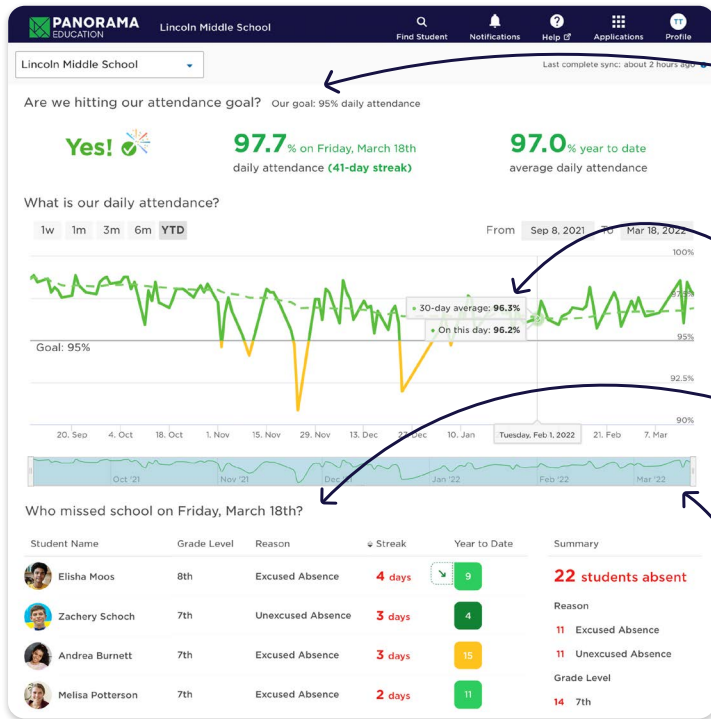
TRACK YOUR GOAL
Understand how your attendance rates compare to your customized school-wide goal in order to celebrate successes or identify opportunities for improvement.

ZOOM IN FOR DETAILS
Click on a specific day to view in-depth metrics, such as this day's attendance rate or its 30-day rolling average.

SEE WHICH STUDENTS ARE ABSENT
Quickly view which students missed school on a specific day. View each student's absence streak and their year-to-date attendance.

SELECT A TIME RANGE
Drag and drop a time range to view attendance patterns for each week, month, semester, year-to date, or a custom time range.

Ways your district can use Panorama to address chronic absenteeism:

- Run surveys with Panorama Surveys and Feedback on the recommended topics in this study, such as school safety, self-efficacy, and student-teacher relations. Use survey data to identify growth opportunities that could move the needle on attendance.
- Use Panorama Student Success to triangulate attendance data with academics, life skills, behavior data. See student survey data from Panorama alongside academic data for a more complete picture of students' strengths and challenges. More deeply understand the factors across school climate and academics that could be leading to chronic absenteeism; then take action with support planning.
- Quickly monitor school-level attendance trends and early warning indicators. View school-level trends with attendance reports in Student Success, and identify students who are "on track" and "at risk" of attendance issues.
- Create intervention plans for students who are chronically absent. Panorama Student Success identifies students who have missed 10% or more days of the current school year, and shows whether those students have an attendance intervention plan or not. This view allows educators to take action to create an intervention plan right from the report.

Conclusion

The rise in chronic absenteeism is a complex issue, and understanding its root causes is essential to reversing the current trend. This study, along with prior research, provides valuable strategies that school and district leaders can use to create more inclusive, supportive, and engaging learning environments. By listening to student voices and combining their insights with an understanding of absenteeism trends across the district, leaders can implement meaningful and targeted supports.

Leveraging the right resources and interventions, school and district leaders can make significant strides in reducing chronic absenteeism and enhancing the educational experience for all students. **This is an opportunity to make a lasting impact—one that addresses the immediate challenges of absenteeism and also paves the way for long-term student success.**

About Panorama Education

Panorama Education is an education technology company founded in 2012 that helps students achieve academic success and well-being, and gives schools and school districts a platform to hear what families, students and teachers need in the classroom. Educators use Panorama's software platform to understand and support students across academics, attendance, behavior, and life skills development. District leaders use the same platform to track progress toward strategic goals, such as literacy, graduation, and school safety. Panorama is proud that its platform is used to support 15 million students in 25,000 schools, 2,000 districts across the United States. For more information, visit www.panoramaed.com.
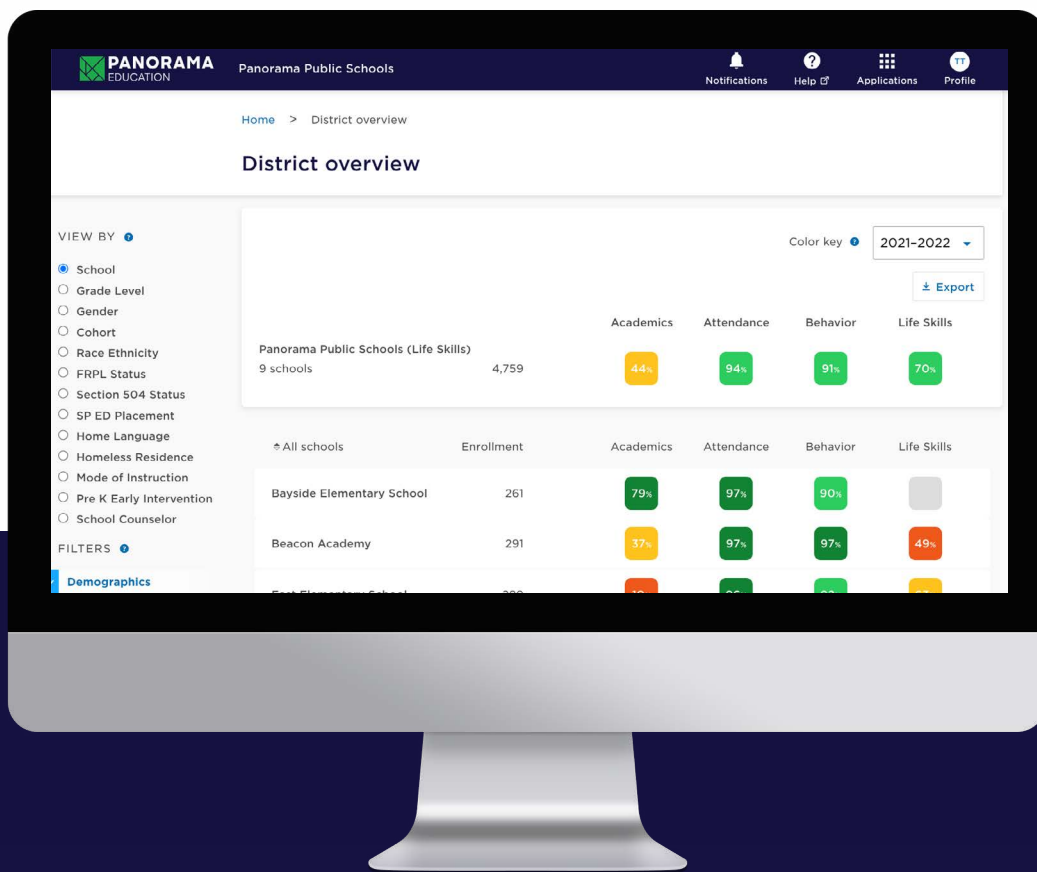
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