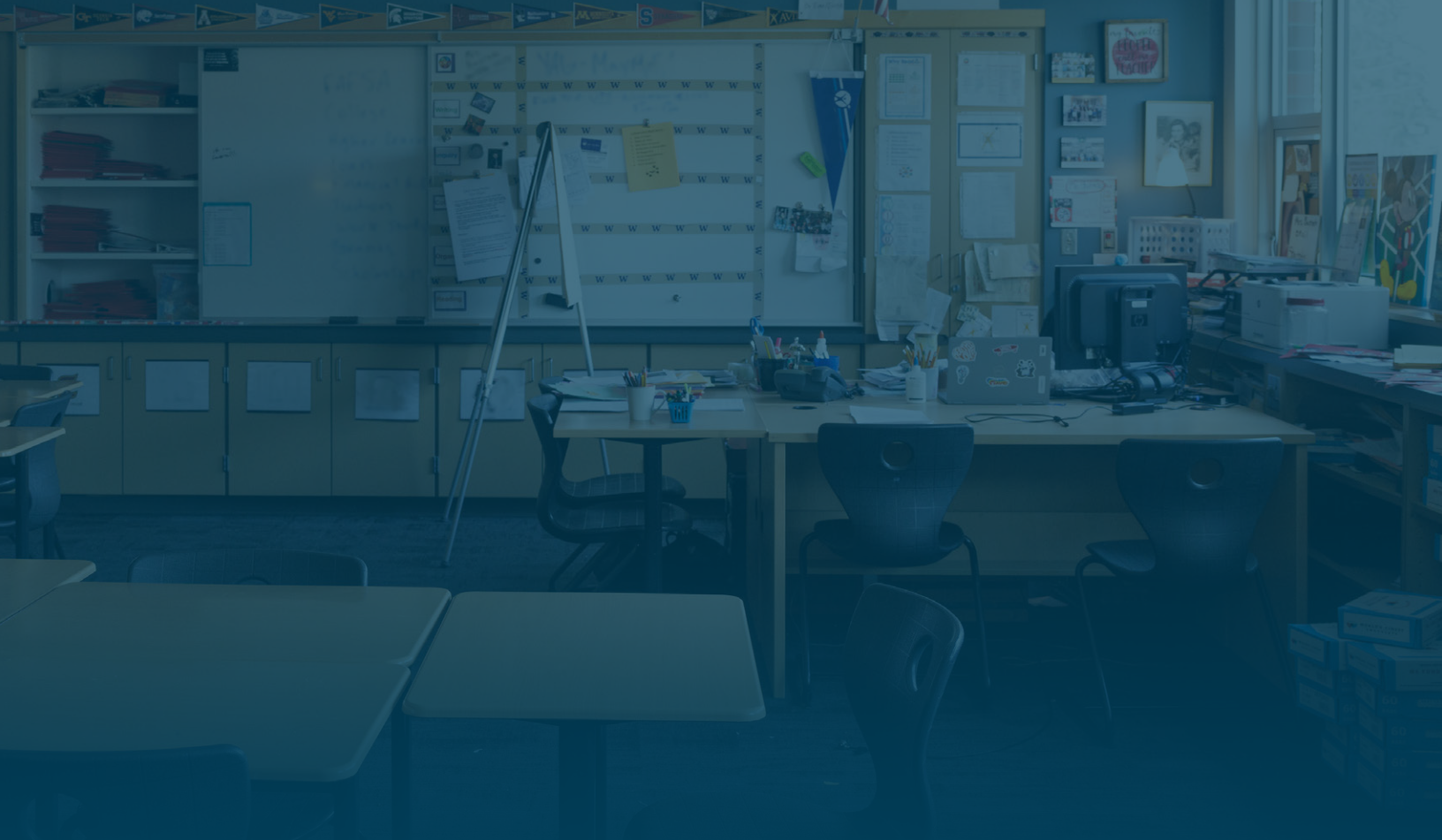




BRIEF

Chronic absenteeism: A continued impediment to academic recovery

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KEY FINDINGS

- Chronic absenteeism rates remain staggeringly high post-pandemic: 1 in 4 students missed at least one day every other week on average. In high-poverty districts, it's 1 in 3.
- Districts with persistently high levels of chronic absenteeism made less progress toward recovering to pre-pandemic levels by 2024.
- In high-poverty districts, academic recovery was stronger for districts with lower chronic absenteeism, while recovery did not vary by absenteeism levels in low-poverty districts.

Introduction

As districts nationwide continue to grapple with pandemic-related academic recovery, chronic absenteeism has emerged as a critical challenge, with implications for student and school success. Recent [data](#) has revealed that, while national rates have improved slightly since their peak in 2022, they have not yet returned to baseline levels. In addition, the highest chronic absenteeism rates are largely found among [high-poverty and urban](#) districts.

Chronic absenteeism remains stubbornly elevated years after the pandemic. At the same time, academic recovery has been uneven across districts. An important question for district leaders is whether these two challenges are connected: are districts with persistently high absenteeism also recovering more slowly academically? Using a sample of 2,000 districts with MAP® Growth™ achievement data in grades 3–8, we explored the association¹ between chronic absenteeism, district-level poverty, and academic recovery from 2019 to 2024.²

Chronic absenteeism

Students are typically flagged as chronically absent if they miss at least 10% of days in the school year. Districts report the percentage of students who are chronically absent each year. Our chronic absenteeism data comes from the AEI [Return to Learn](#) Tracker.

We defined **high chronic absenteeism** as a district having a rate greater than 20%. To be classified as having **“consistently high” absenteeism**, a district had to have reported a high chronic absenteeism rate across all three post-COVID years (2022, 2023, and 2024). Districts identified as **“never high” absenteeism** were those with rates no greater than 20% in each of the three years.

¹ The analyses presented here are descriptive and should not be interpreted as evidence of a causal relationship between absenteeism and academic recovery.

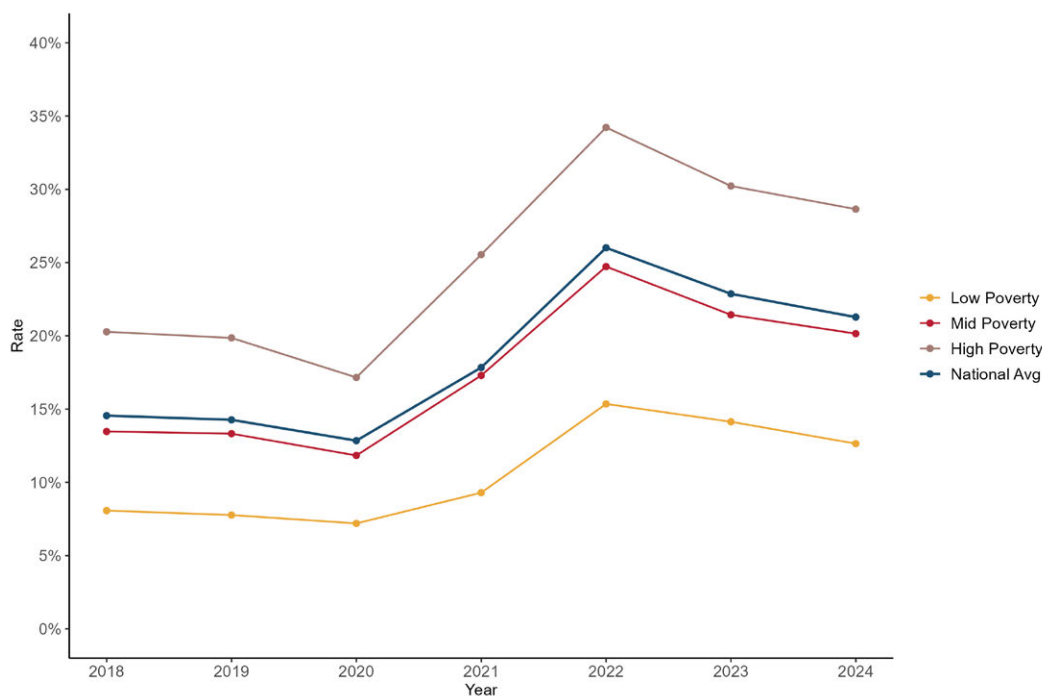
² Due to a lag in states reporting absenteeism data, we were only able to incorporate chronic absenteeism rates through 2024. As a result, all analyses examining the relationship between absenteeism and academic recovery are limited to recovery through 2024.

Chronic absenteeism rates were consistently higher for all districts post-pandemic, and differences between high- and low-poverty districts have become more extreme

As shown in Figure 1, national chronic absenteeism rates remain elevated and widespread post-pandemic, rising to 1 in 4 students chronically absent by 2022 and only moderately declining in the two years following.

High-poverty districts experienced the largest jump: from 20% to nearly 35% (over 1 in 3 students) from the pre- to post-COVID period. By 2024, approximately 30% of students in high-poverty districts missed at least one day every other week of school.

Figure 1: Chronic absenteeism peaked in 2022 and remains highest in high-poverty districts



Note. District chronic absenteeism rates were provided by [AEI](#). Districts with available free lunch data from the federal Common Core of Data ([CCD](#)) are included.

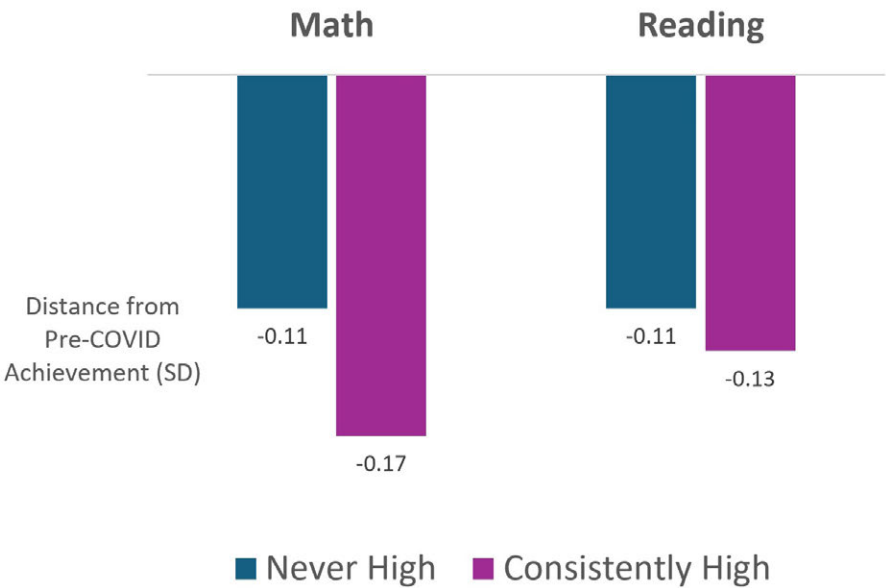
Districts with persistently high levels of chronic absenteeism were further from recovery

To understand whether sustained attendance challenges are related to academic recovery, we compared districts that experienced high chronic absenteeism in all three post-COVID years with districts that never crossed that threshold during the same period. Figure 2 shows the remaining gap between achievement levels in fall 2024 and the pre-COVID (fall 2019) baseline achievement in standard deviation (SD) units. The line at 0 indicates the point at which a district would be considered to have “recovered” to pre-pandemic achievement levels.

For all subjects and absenteeism groupings, achievement in 2024 remained significantly below pre-COVID averages.³ However, districts that experienced consistently high chronic absenteeism rates in recent years face a longer road to recovery.

In math, districts with consistently high absenteeism rates were about 50% further from recovery than districts that never experienced high absenteeism (0.17 SD versus 0.11 SD below pre-pandemic achievement). Differences in reading recovery were smaller (0.13 SD versus 0.11 SD) but also point to chronic absenteeism as an important area for district leaders to consider as part of recovery planning.

Figure 2: Districts with persistently high absenteeism remain further from pre-COVID achievement



Note. Includes only districts with sufficient MAP Growth data from 2019–2024, limited to grades 3–8. District chronic absenteeism rates were provided by [AEL](#). See technical appendix for details on sample.

Persistent absenteeism is associated with a slower return to pre-pandemic achievement levels, but this relationship may not be the same in all contexts. Because the highest absenteeism rates are concentrated in high-poverty districts, we next examined whether the association between absenteeism and academic recovery varies by district poverty level.

³ To help put the scale of the remaining recovery in perspective, the average [educational intervention](#) raises student achievement by about 0.05 standard deviations.

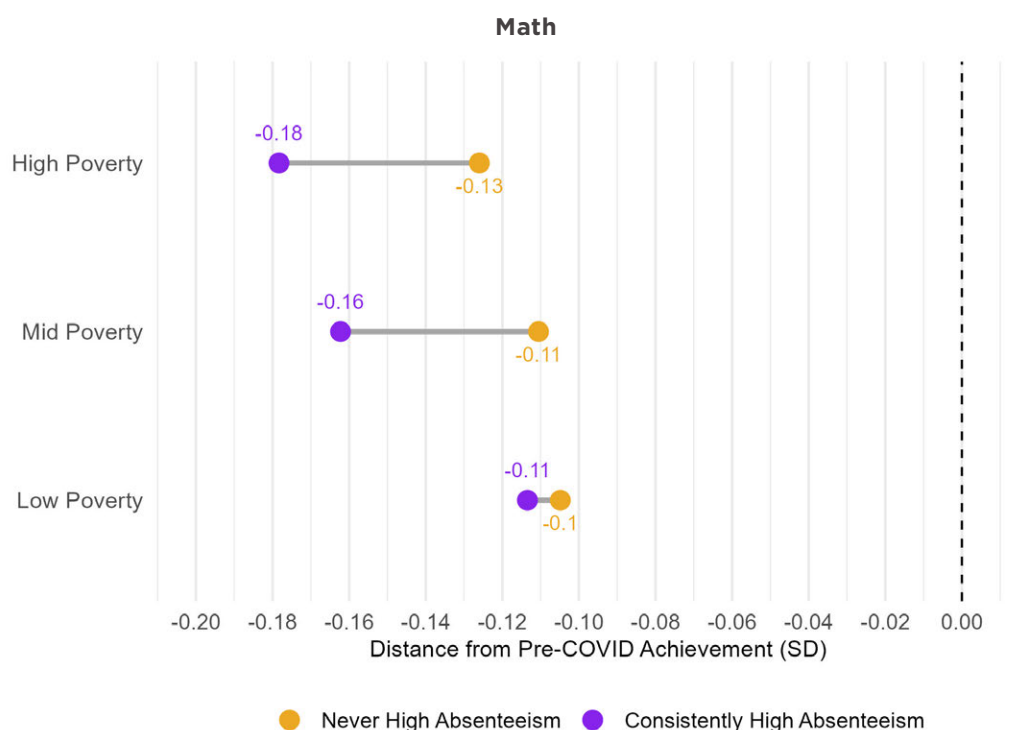
Clear variation in academic recovery by absenteeism for high-poverty districts

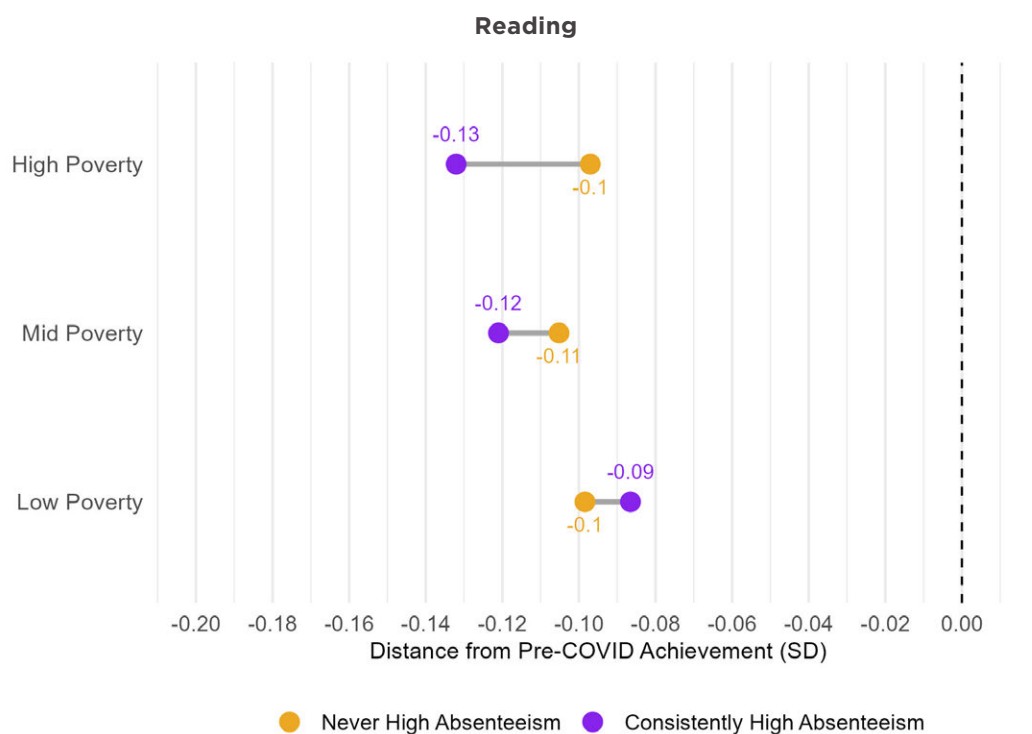
Figure 3 shows how the distance to academic recovery differs by chronic absenteeism rates within district poverty levels. The purple dots mark the distance to recovery in SD units for districts that had consistently high absenteeism, and the yellow dots are for districts that never did. Across poverty levels, districts with consistently high absenteeism are generally further from pre-COVID achievement levels. The one exception to this pattern is for low-poverty schools in reading, where schools with consistently high absenteeism are slightly closer to recovery.

As shown by the length of the grey lines between the dots, the difference in remaining recovery by absenteeism is much larger among mid- and high-poverty districts than low-poverty districts. In our sample of mid- and high-poverty districts, we find that those with consistently high absenteeism rates were further from recovery than those with lower absenteeism rates. In contrast, low-poverty districts showed similar levels of recovery regardless of whether they experienced persistently high absenteeism.

Said differently, we find the strength of the association between absenteeism and recovery depends on district poverty, particularly in math. Among mid- and high-poverty districts, those with consistently high absenteeism were about 40% further from recovery in math than districts that never experienced high absenteeism, whereas low-poverty districts had similar recovery regardless of their absenteeism. Differences in recovery by absenteeism were smaller in reading but followed the same pattern.

Figure 3: Academic recovery gaps by absenteeism are largest in high-poverty districts





Note. Includes only districts with sufficient MAP Growth data from 2019–2024, limited to grades 3–8. District chronic absenteeism rates were provided by AEI. See technical appendix for details on sample.

Conclusion

Despite some progress since the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, chronic absenteeism remains an ongoing challenge for school districts. In high-poverty districts, 1 in 3 students missed at least 10% of school days, which translates to more than three weeks of school in most states. To put this in perspective, this is the equivalent of a student taking a full month off from school for spring break instead of the traditional week-long break.

Districts with persistently high rates of chronic absenteeism remain farthest from pre-COVID achievement levels. These districts were about 50% further from recovery in math than districts that never experienced high absenteeism rates; differences were smaller in reading. Our results are aligned with recent findings from the [Education Recovery Scorecard](#), which showed recovery would have been meaningfully faster if absence rates had returned to pre-pandemic levels.

Notably, the relationship between absenteeism and recovery is strongest in higher-poverty districts, where the distance to recovery is also largest. Among high-poverty districts, those with consistently high absenteeism were further from recovery than those that never experienced high absenteeism. In contrast, low-poverty districts showed similar levels of recovery regardless of whether they experienced persistently high absenteeism.

Improving attendance should be part of the academic recovery strategy in most districts, rather than seen as a distinct issue. These efforts may be especially impactful in high-poverty districts, where absenteeism is both more prevalent and more strongly associated with unfinished academic recovery. For district and state leaders, the findings point to the importance of identifying where persistent absenteeism and academic recovery gaps overlap, then ensuring those communities have the support needed to help students attend school consistently and regain lost academic ground.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Sofia Postell is a research analyst at NWEA®. She supports a variety of projects focused on academic recovery, measurement of trends in student achievement, and the effects of school resources and policy changes. Sofia received a BS in computer science and sociology from Northeastern University.



Emily Morton's research focuses on estimating the effects of K-12 education policies and programs related to instructional time and learning environments on student outcomes. She conducts much of her work in partnership with schools and districts, with the intention of producing actionable findings that will directly inform policy and practice and serve to reduce inequality. Before rejoining NWEA in 2025, Dr. Morton was a researcher at the Center for Analysis of Longitudinal Data in Education Research at the American Institutes for Research. She holds a PhD in education and a master of public policy from Stanford University.



Dr. Megan Kuhfeld is director of growth modeling and data analytics at NWEA. Her research seeks to understand students' trajectories of academic and social-emotional learning (SEL) and the school and neighborhood influences that promote optimal growth. Dr. Kuhfeld completed a doctorate in quantitative methods in education and a master's degree in statistics from the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA).



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