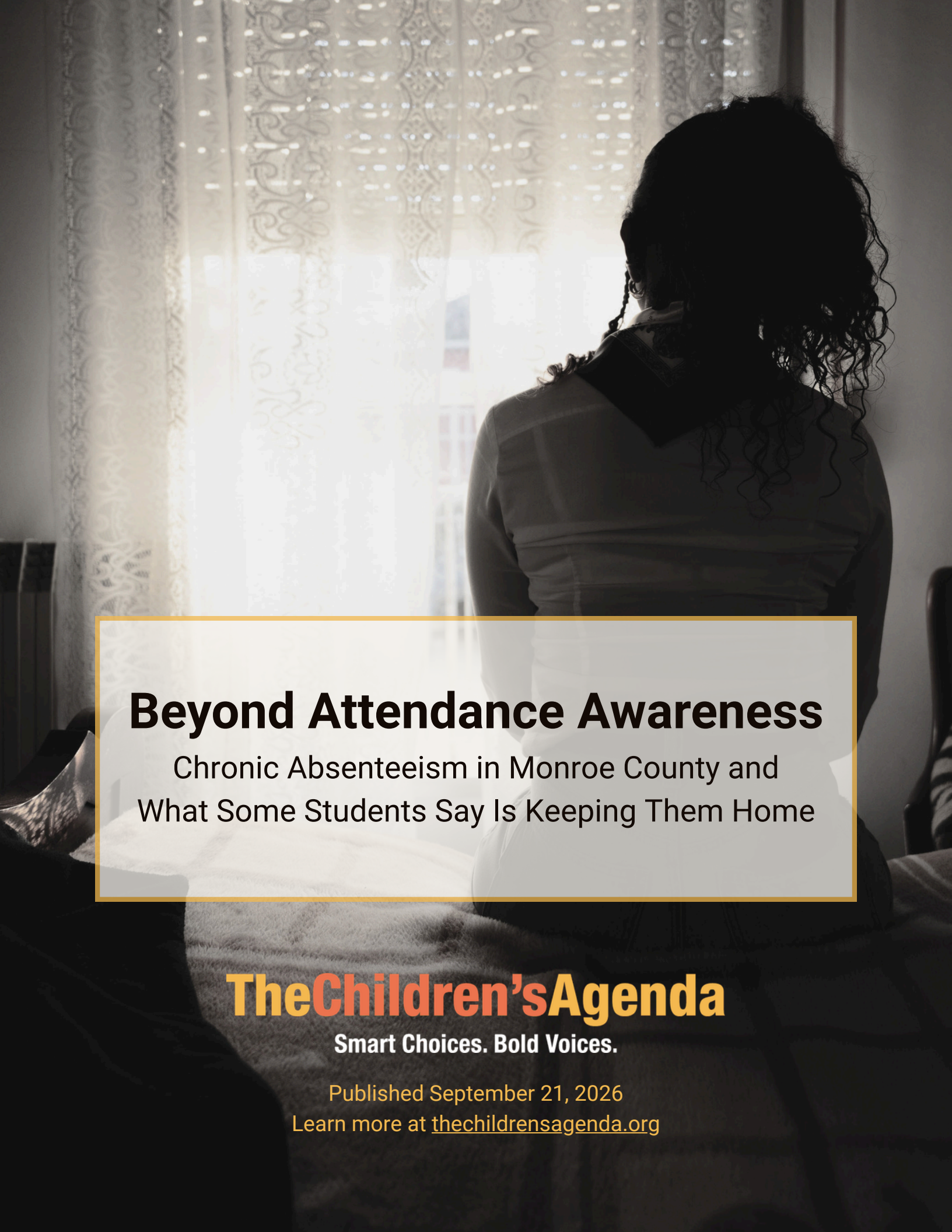

Beyond Attendance Awareness

Chronic Absenteeism in Monroe County and What Some Students Say Is Keeping Them Home

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Executive Summary

Every child in New York State is guaranteed the right to a "sound basic education," to ensure young people reach adulthood prepared with the tools to achieve economic security and fully participate in society. However, tens of thousands of children in Monroe County are falling significantly behind academically due to absenteeism. Chronic absenteeism, defined as students missing at least ten percent of school days for excused or unexcused reasons, remains far above pre-pandemic levels in Monroe County, even five years after COVID-19 first disrupted school attendance. In the 2024-2025 school year, nearly 1 in 4 elementary students (24%) and nearly 1 in 3 high school students (32.4%) were chronically absent. These rates have improved only modestly since peaking in 2021-2022 and remain significantly above where they were in 2017-2018.

Chronic absenteeism has increased nationwide since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the trends in Monroe County largely mirror other communities throughout New York State and the nation. School districts with higher concentrations of students living in economically disadvantaged households are more likely to have higher rates of chronic absenteeism, though there are exceptions and many other factors at play. Some of the wealthiest communities in Monroe County have the lowest rates of absenteeism for elementary students, while some of the most impoverished communities have the highest rates. Greece stood out for coming the closest to reducing absenteeism back to pre-pandemic norms. We cannot say definitively why this is the case, but Greece has invested heavily in the community school model fostering greater collaboration and outreach with the community to meet student and family needs. Countywide, absenteeism rates are highest among Hispanic and Black students, nonbinary students, students with disabilities, students experiencing housing instability, English language learners, and students from economically disadvantaged households.

The City of Rochester is an extreme outlier demographically compared to the suburbs and unsurprisingly has the most alarming rates of absenteeism in the county. Although the Rochester City School District (RCSD) enrolls roughly one-third as many students as the county's other seventeen suburban districts combined, its students miss more school days in total. RCSD elementary students are more likely than not (57.7%) to be chronically absent. RCSD high schoolers miss an average of over two months of school per year, and more than seven out of ten students (71.5%) are chronically absent. Rates at charter schools were similar to RCSD, though their data were not always complete or reliable for a detailed comparison. However, the depth of the challenges facing RCSD and local charter schools should not overshadow the rise in absenteeism countywide.

To understand why students were missing school, The Children's Agenda partnered with the Center for Teen Empowerment to survey 302 students from the city of Rochester over two years. Students were asked to check all the reasons they missed school in the past year. Illness was the most cited reason (79%), followed by family emergencies (38%), transportation problems (33%), suspension (25%), mental health challenges (25%), and caregiving responsibilities for family members (25%).

Taken together, the data show that **chronic absenteeism is not a single problem with a single fix, but the product of overlapping barriers — health, transportation, school discipline, and mental health — that fall disproportionately on Rochester students and specific student subgroups.** Some tangible solutions include coordinated investment in reliable transportation, alternatives to exclusionary discipline, accessible mental health support, and investments in the community school model.

Key Takeaways

- Chronic absenteeism remains above pre-pandemic levels in Monroe County, with 24% of elementary students and 32.4% of high school students missing at least ten percent of school days.
- Wealthier communities in Monroe County, such as Pittsford, Fairport, and Honeoye Falls-Lima, had the lowest rates of chronic absenteeism for elementary students in the 2024-2025 school year, while communities with more students living in poverty, such as Rochester, East Irondequoit, and Gates-Chili, had the highest rates of absenteeism.
- Students experiencing housing instability/homelessness, students from economically disadvantaged households, Hispanic and Black students, nonbinary students, students with disabilities, and English language learners have the highest rates of chronic absenteeism in Monroe County.
- The Rochester City School District (RCSD) faces an absenteeism crisis, with more students being chronically absent than not (57.7% of elementary students and 71.5% of high school students).
- The Greece Central School District is a bright spot, reducing chronic absenteeism at elementary schools to only 2.2 percentage points above pre-pandemic levels. Longridge Elementary in Greece reduced its chronic absenteeism *below* pre-pandemic levels from 18.5% in 2017-2018 to 6.4% in 2024-2025.
- Our survey of Rochester high school students on the reasons for chronic absenteeism showed illness was the most cited reason (79%), followed by family emergencies (38%), transportation problems (33%), suspension (25%), mental health challenges (25%), and caregiving responsibilities for family members (25%).
- Greater attention must be paid to reducing the multi-faceted barriers students face in attending school, as general awareness campaigns have not done enough to reduce absenteeism.

Our Recommendations

- Conduct a comprehensive communitywide survey of students and families to map the root causes of absenteeism, such as through an addendum to the Monroe County Youth Risk Behavior Survey.
- Invest in preventative approaches to absenteeism that expand beyond traditional awareness campaigns and address root causes.
- Prioritize individualized engagement with chronically absent students and their families to address barriers to attendance.
- Revise student discipline policies in New York State (Pass the Solutions Not Suspensions Bill), invest in alternatives to suspensions like restorative practices, and provide professional development and accountability to staff for following progressive discipline policies.
- Invest in mental health supports for students, such as satellite mental health clinics which may be sustained through the billing of insurance. Design mental health awareness and outreach campaigns tailored specifically to female and LGBTQ+ students.
- Increase New York State funding and support for the community school model which could support schools in coordinating community resources to address chronic absenteeism and deepen engagement with families and students to identify root causes.