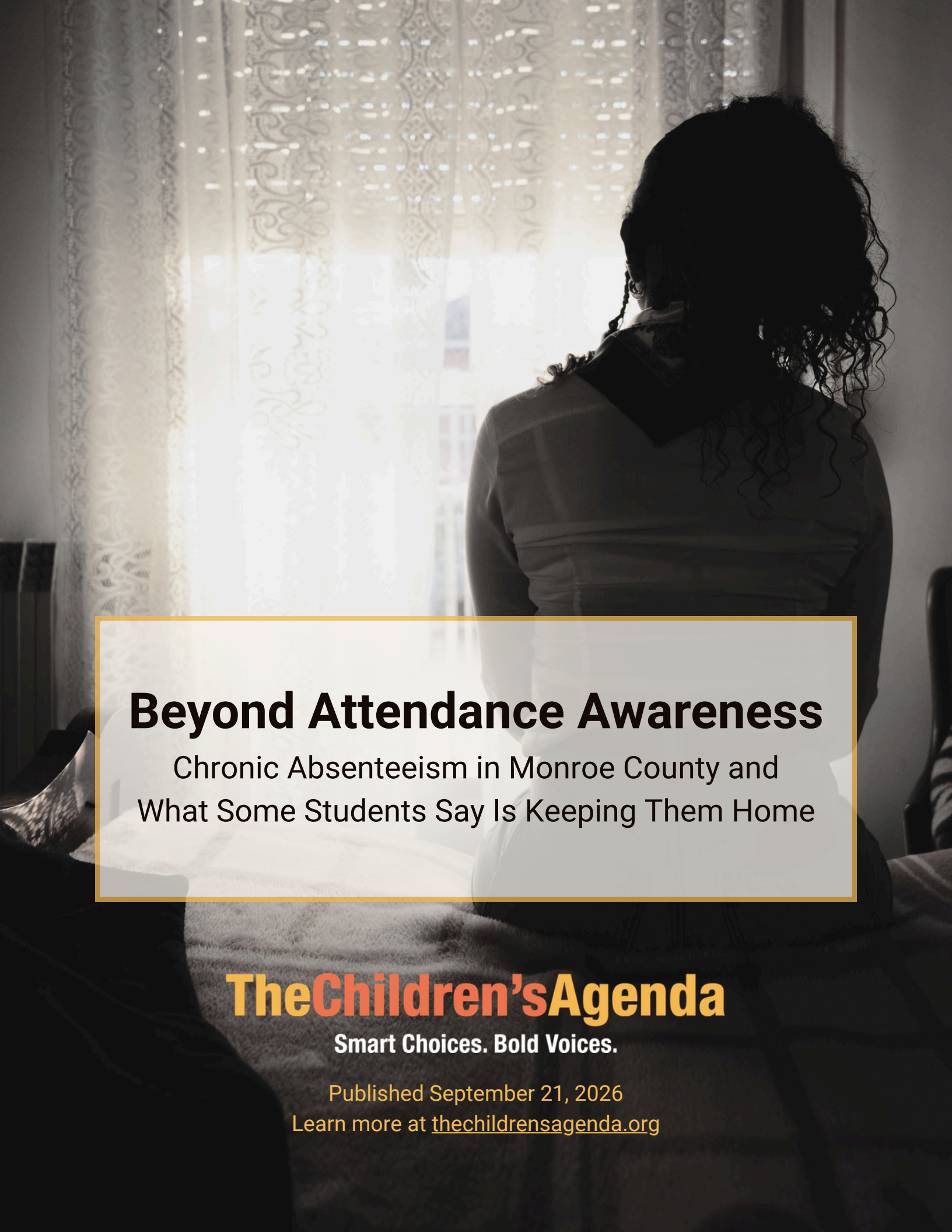

Beyond Attendance Awareness

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

TheChildren'sAgenda
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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.

Introduction

Education is an essential building block in a child's social-emotional development, a pathway to economic security, and provides the tools to fully participate in a democratic society. Children in New York state are guaranteed the right to a "sound basic education"; however, tens of thousands of children in Monroe County are falling significantly behind academically due to absenteeism.

Rates of student absenteeism soared during the COVID-19 pandemic and, according to the most recent available data, remain significantly above pre-COVID levels. This report takes a closer look at chronic absenteeism in Monroe County, using data from the New York State Education Department and survey responses from local high school students, predominantly from the city of Rochester.

The term "chronic absenteeism" was first used twenty years ago by researcher Hedy Chang to describe students who missed at least ten percent of school days.[1] At the time, Chang was studying the relationship between absences in kindergarten and first grade and children being able to read proficiently by the end of third grade. Her theory was simple enough: the less instruction a child receives, the farther they fall behind, and the less likely they are to be on track academically. Common metrics like truancy (missing school without permission) and average daily attendance (how many students come to school each day) do not measure all the days individual students miss throughout the school year.

Research by Chang and others suggests that the impact of absences is cumulative, with each additional day decreasing students' average test scores in math and reading. This, again, is common sense, as students require time on task to improve and will be less prepared with fewer hours of instruction and practice. Students with fewer enrichment opportunities and academic supports outside of school are likely to fall farther behind than wealthier and more resourced households. When a child is chronically absent, they are likely to have fallen significantly behind.

Impacts of Chronic Absenteeism on Education

Lower Test Scores in Math and Reading

As absences increase, there is an associated decrease in standardized test scores in reading and math. One study using National Assessment for Educational Progress (NAEP) found students who missed 3 or more days in the prior month scored, on average, more than a full year behind their peers with no absences.[2]

Reading Proficiency by Third Grade Very Unlikely

Another study showed that 64 percent of students who missed less than 5 percent of school days in kindergarten and first grade—what authors called "no risk"—scored proficient in reading by 3rd grade. Only 17

[1] https://www.attendanceworks.org/our-history/
[2] Ginsburg, Alan Et al. 2014. Absences Add Up, 3-4. https://www.attendanceworks.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/05/Absenses-Add-Up_September-3rd-2014.pdf

percent of chronically absent students in both kindergarten and first grade were proficient in reading by 3rd grade.[3]

A study by the Annie E. Casey Foundation found students who were not reading proficiently in 3rd grade were four times more likely to not graduate high school by age 19 than those who were proficient.[4]

Strong Predictor of Dropping Out

Researchers at Johns Hopkins University developed a model to predict which students will not graduate high school based on indicators in middle school. They found that chronic absenteeism was the most predictive indicator (68% less likely to graduate than other students), even more so than a student's grades or misbehavior (suspensions).[5]

Lower College Enrollment

The D.C. Policy Center, using data from the Office of the State Superintendent of Education, looked at postsecondary enrollment for high school graduates six months after graduation. They found a gap of 45 percentage points (72% vs 27%) in postsecondary enrollment between students who had satisfactory attendance and those who had been profoundly absent (30% of days or more).[6] The real impact of absenteeism on college enrollment is larger, given that the report was looking at high school graduates, while students who are chronically absent are much less likely to graduate high school at all.

Data on Chronic Absenteeism in Monroe County

For the 2017-2018 school year, Monroe County's chronic absenteeism rate for elementary students was 15 percent. That number was already concerning, as it indicated at least 1 out of every 7 children in elementary school were missing a significant amount of time on task. At the height of the pandemic in the 2021-2022 school year, that number more than doubled to 32 percent; in the 2024-2025 school year, it was still elevated at 24 percent (nearly 1 in 4 children).

Rates of chronic absenteeism tend to be higher in high school. In 2017-2018, Monroe County's chronic absenteeism rate for high school students was a troubling 22.8 percent. The rate peaked at 35.8 percent in the 2021-2022 school year and has barely declined since then to 32.4 percent (nearly 1 in 3 students) in 2024-2025.

Chronic absenteeism is not just a problem in Monroe County. School districts across New York and the United States saw their rates of chronic absenteeism rise dramatically during the early years of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the rates have remained significantly elevated. Chronic absenteeism rates peaked during the 2021-22 school

[3] Attendance Works, 2011. Attendance in Early Elementary Grades, 12. https://www.attendanceworks.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/06/ASR-Mini-Report-Attendance-Readiness-and-Third-Grade-Outcomes-7-8-11.pdf
[4] Hernandez, Donald J. 2012. Double Jeopardy, How Third-Grade Reading Skills and Poverty Influence High School Graduation, 6. https://assets.aecf.org/m/resourcedoc/AECF-DoubleJeopardy-2012-Full.pdf
[5] Balfanz R., Herzog L., & Mac Iver, D. J. 2007. https://new.every1graduates.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/03/preventing_student_disengagement.pdf
[6] Coffin, C., & Mason, H., 2025. Chronic absenteeism as a barrier to college and career readiness in D.C. https://www.dcpolicycenter.org/publications/chronic-absenteeism-as-a-barrier-to-college-and-career-readiness-in-d-c/

year, when students missed extended periods of school due to illness, family emergencies, and mental health challenges.

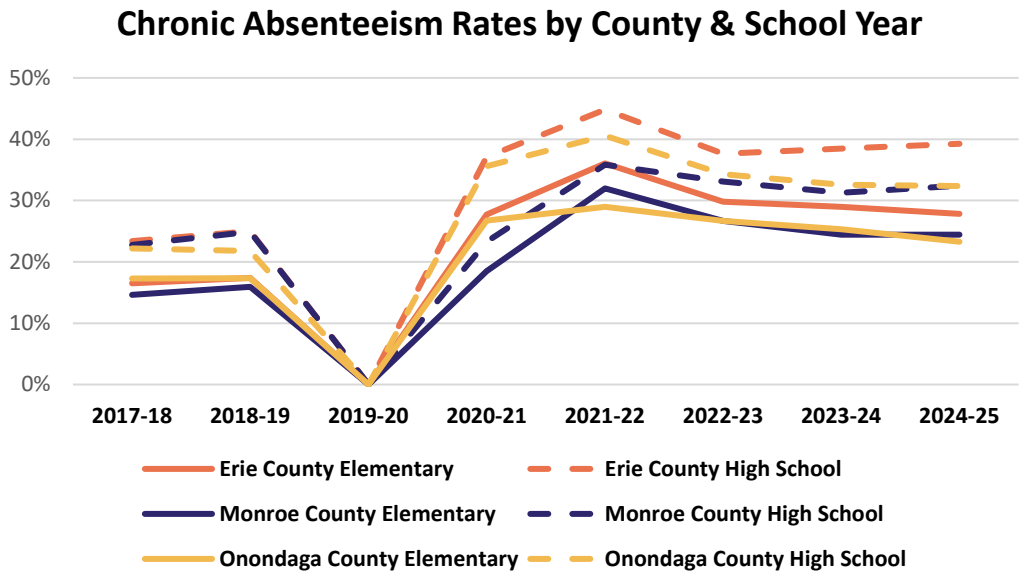
Absenteeism rates for both elementary and high school students in Erie, Monroe, and Onondaga counties were largely consistent with each other and the New York state average pre-pandemic. While Monroe County rates continued to mirror the statewide average during and after the pandemic, districts in Erie and Onondaga each saw larger increases early in the pandemic than Monroe did. **Erie County's chronic absenteeism rate remains well above its peer counties and the New York state average, while Onondaga has fallen more rapidly and is now comparable to Monroe**. The story of the chronic absenteeism crisis, and the students most impacted by it, emerges in even greater detail at the school district level.

Table 1. Chronic Absenteeism Rates for Elementary Schools (ES) and High Schools (HS) in Peer Counties and New York State Averages[7]

School Year	Monroe County ES	Monroe County HS	Erie County ES	Erie County HS	Onondaga County ES	Onondaga County HS	NYS Average ES	NYS Average HS
2017-18	15%	22.8%	17%	23%	17%	22%	15%	23.2%
2018-19	16%	24.9%	17%	25%	17%	22%	15.6%	24.5%
2019-20[8]	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%
2020-21	18%	23.3%	28%	37%	27%	36%	21.5%	29.1%
2021-22	32%	35.8%	36%	45%	29%	41%	29.8%	37.8%
2022-23	27%	33.1%	30%	38%	27%	34%	26.4%	34.1%
2023-24	24%	31.2%	29%	38%	25%	33%	25.1%	31.5%
2024-25	24%	32.4%	28%	39%	23%	32%	24.6%	31.3%

[7] These tables and charts were compiled using publicly available data on chronic absenteeism from the New York State Education Department. The number of days students were absent was provided as part of a separate FOIL request made to NYSED.

[8] Absenteeism in the 2019-2020 school year is reported as 0% because the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted in-person learning making attendance data unreliable.



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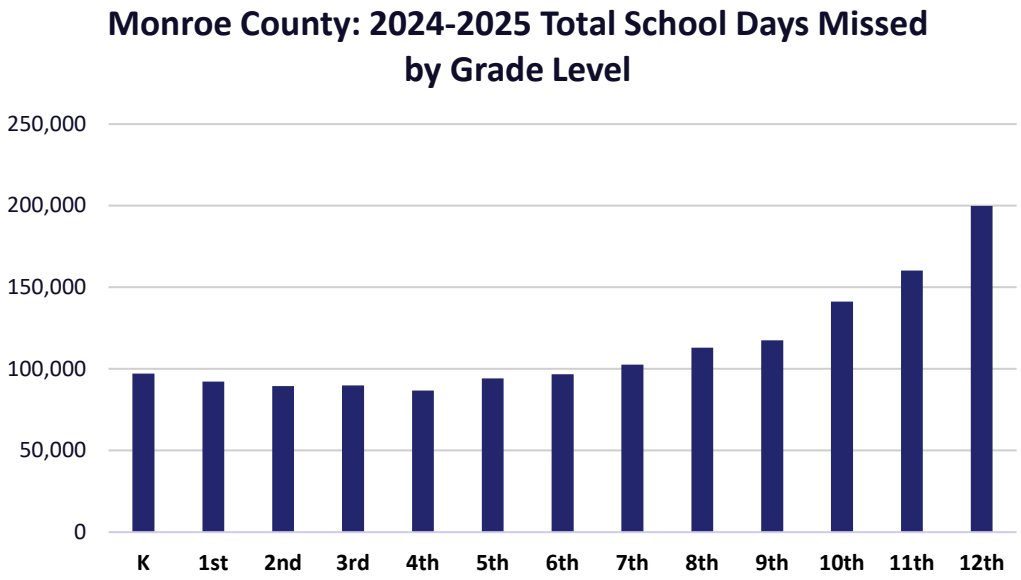
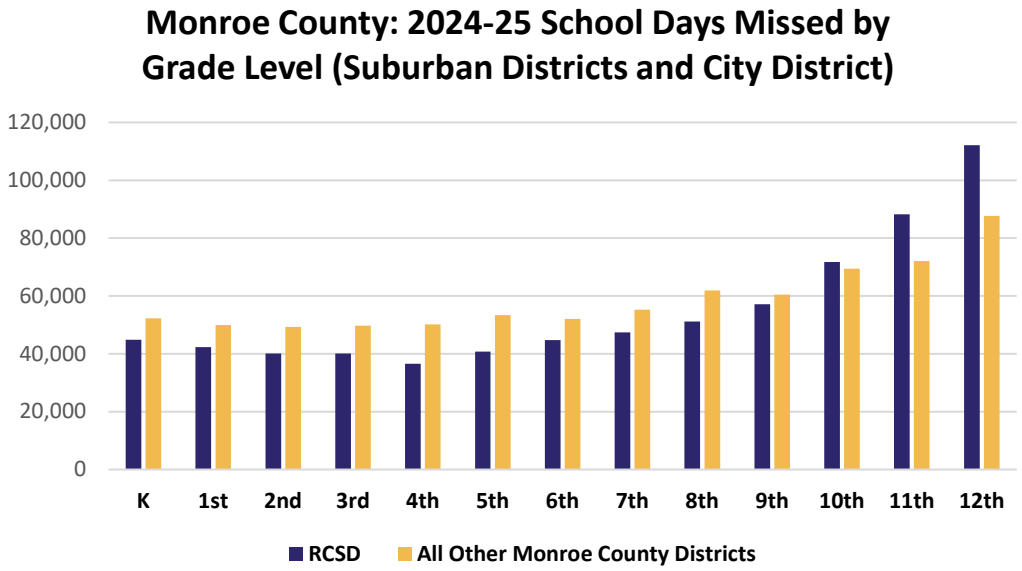
A Deeper Look: Grade Levels, Demographic Groups, and School Districts

Countywide, the number of school days missed declines slightly from kindergarten to 4th grade, then gradually increases until students reach high school, where absenteeism grows at a faster rate and peaks in 12th grade.



[9] Rates of Chronic Absenteeism were not reported for the first year of the pandemic in the 2019-2020 school year, similarly the numbers for the 2020-2021 school year are less reliable given the widespread practice of hybrid learning and the inconsistency in how hybrid learning was adopted across school districts.

The pattern of absenteeism by grade level is similar across suburban districts and the city; however, the rate of increasing absenteeism in high school is larger at the Rochester City School District (RCSD) than in the suburbs. In the 2024-25 school year, RCSD enrolled 20,593 students, compared to 71,526 students enrolled across the seventeen suburban districts in Monroe County. Despite making up only about one-third of suburban enrollment, RCSD students missed significantly more school days than all their suburban peers combined. RCSD 12th graders alone missed 112,000 school days, compared to about 88,000 for all other Monroe County seniors.

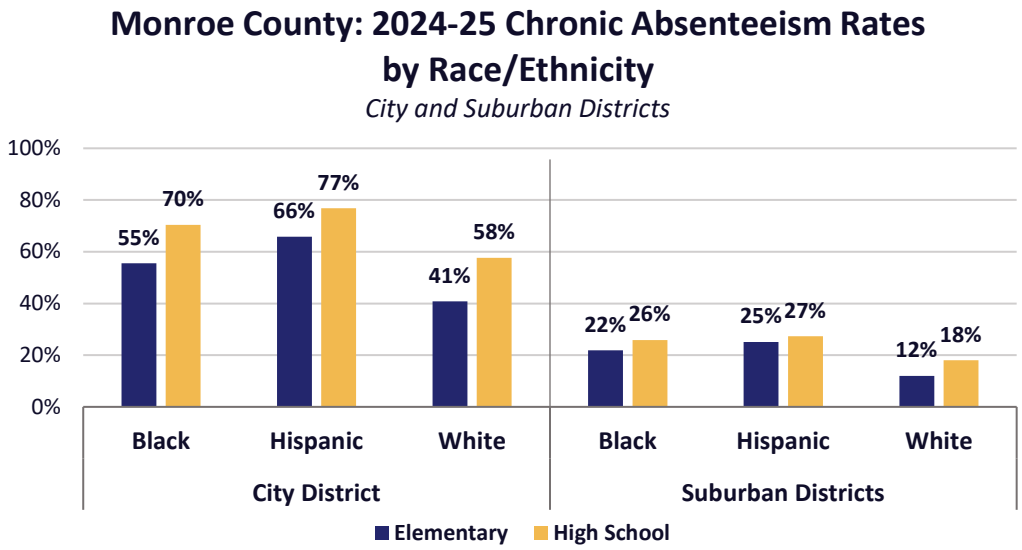


Certain demographic groups are disproportionately impacted by absenteeism: American Indian/Alaska Native, Black, and Hispanic students; nonbinary students; students with disabilities; students experiencing homelessness; and students from economically disadvantaged households.

Table 2. Monroe County: 2024-25 Average Days Absent by Demographic Groups[10]

Demographic Category	Rochester City School District	Monroe County Suburban Districts
All Students	35.3	11.0
American Indian/Alaska Native	42.0*	-
Asian	26.4	8.5
Black	35.3	12.9
Hispanic	38.2	13.7
Multiracial	33.5	12.2
White	27.3	10.2
Female	35.2	7.8
Male	35.4	10.1
Nonbinary	62.1~	14.5
Students with Disabilities	38.8	13.9
General Education Students	34.3	10.5
Economically Disadvantaged	36.5	14.4
Homeless/McKinney-Vento	44.9	24.9
English Language Learner	36.2	14.2
Formerly English Language Learner	28.3	9.9
Native English Speaker	35.1	10.8

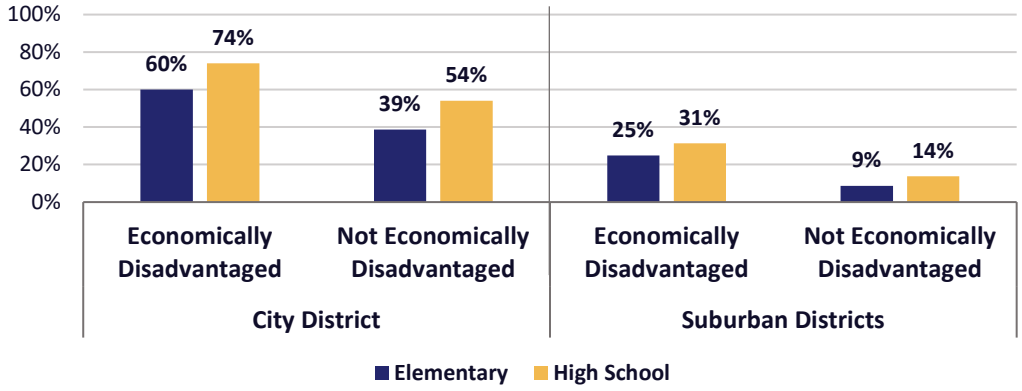
*American Indian/Alaska Native population at RCSD is only 27 students
~Nonbinary population at RCSD is only 9 students



[10] This table lists the average number of days absent per student by demographic group. These averages are for all students, including those with no absences.

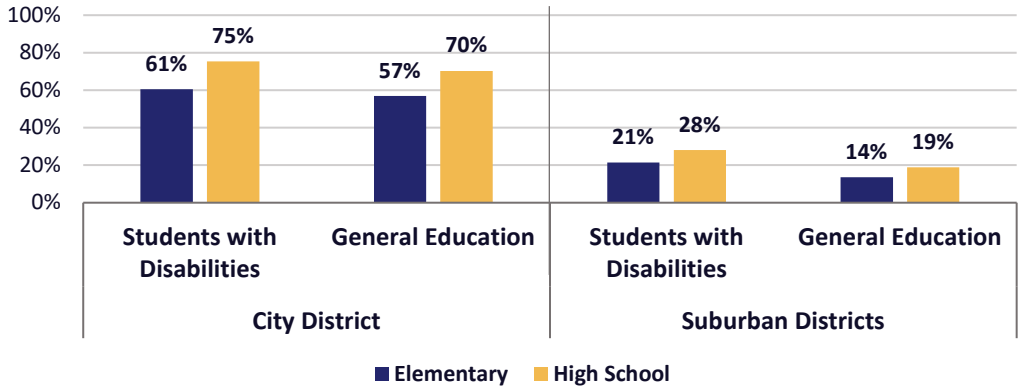
Monroe County: 2024-25 Chronic Absenteeism Rates by Economic Status

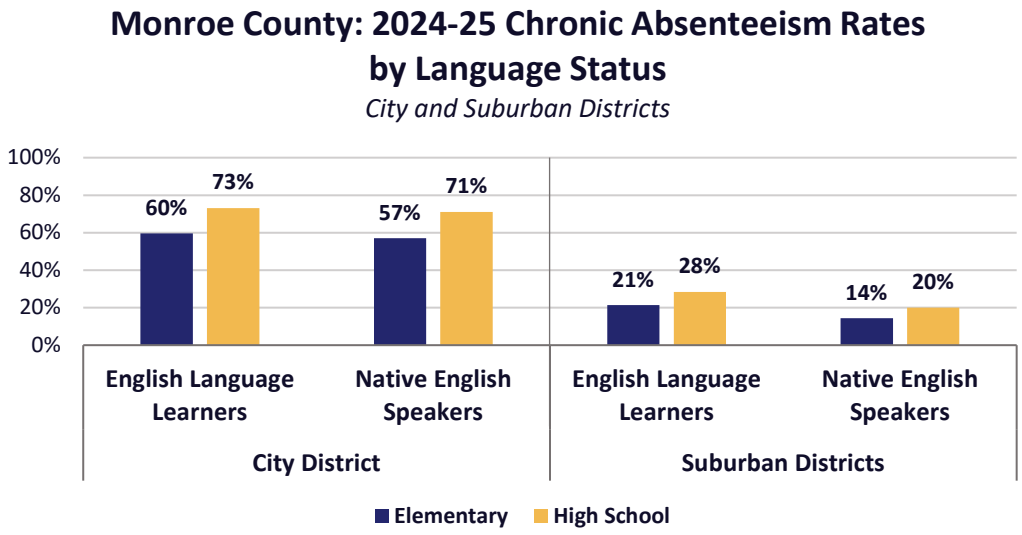
City and Suburban Districts



Monroe County: 2024-25 Chronic Absenteeism Rates by Disability Status

City and Suburban Districts





High school students consistently miss more school than elementary students in all districts, though RCSD elementary schools also have higher rates than suburban high schools. In suburban school districts, we see significant gaps in chronic absenteeism between all mutually exclusive subgroups, such as students in general education and students with disabilities or English language learners and native English speakers. In RCSD, there is less differentiation between some subgroups; however, there are still notable gaps by race/ethnicity, economic status, and housing instability.

Chronic absenteeism is measured by how many students meet a specific cut-off point of 10% or 18 days absent. Another way to look at absenteeism is by the average number of days missed per student. Research cited earlier shows that the academic impact of absences is cumulative, and therefore each additional day of absence matters. Reducing absences for students closer to 5% of school days rather than just below the 10% cutoff could improve outcomes for school districts, regardless of those districts' current levels of chronic absenteeism.

Table 3. 2024-25 Average Days Missed by Grade Level & Monroe County School District

District	K	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th	6th	7th	8th	9th	10th	11th	12th
Brighton	9.51	9.36	8.86	8.62	8.03	8.79	8.77	9.32	9.16	8.56	9.93	10.81	13.55
Brockport	12.82	11.23	10.61	12.16	11.36	10.81	12.22	12.44	16.51	14.91	15.71	14.78	20.09
Churchville Chili	10.41	9.14	9.82	10.46	9.64	10.53	11.28	11.11	13.62	8.9	12.76	10.69	11.64
East Irondequoit	15.5	14.64	14.67	11.34	11.59	12.05	14.22	14.63	14.33	12.5	13.53	13.16	8.26
East Rochester	14.65	11.11	9.23	9.89	11.02	12.9	11.51	14.08	12.92	16.89	19.44	16.59	12.05
Fairport	7.15	7.61	7.95	6.96	8.07	7.89	7.26	8.69	10.63	8.95	9.76	10.66	11.87
Gates Chili	13.05	11.84	10.97	10.6	11.58	10.7	12.35	11.79	12.57	15.17	15.95	17.9	21.04
Greece	12.07	10.66	10.58	9.03	9.87	9.66	8.15	8	9.08	11.38	13.45	14.73	21.67
Hilton	9.81	10.78	10.03	10.15	10.81	10.35	10.15	11.76	11.82	8.79	10.1	10.85	16.09
Honeoye Falls-Lima	9.27	8.4	6.91	8	8.58	9.95	7.49	7.84	9.51	9.26	8.77	11.16	14.27
Penfield	10.26	9.19	10.13	8.67	8.58	9.27	8.84	8.75	10.3	8.5	9.93	9.96	13.54
Pittsford	7.9	7.82	8.07	7.98	7.88	8.4	7.64	8.77	8.54	6.91	10.43	9.78	13.08
Rochester	30.94	28.84	26.72	26.59	26.42	26.16	29.85	31.89	33.76	36.91	42.35	50.59	56.89
Rush Henrietta	11.73	10.46	9.74	8.91	9.7	9.82	10.21	10.77	12.14	11.29	12.92	16.12	16.93
Spencerport	11.17	11.54	9.62	9.79	9.3	11.28	11.84	11.93	12.8	12.51	13.16	16.04	19.25
Webster	10.72	9.87	9.13	9.41	9.22	10.08	8.53	9.96	10.61	10.86	11.87	11.06	12.2
West Irondequoit	9.11	9.45	8.85	8.76	9.44	9.8	10.52	11.7	11.11	10.3	11.08	12.02	12.85
Wheatland Chili	8.98	8.92	8.25	11.13	12.98	9.39	13.05	11.51	12.34	14.95	27.84	21	22.13
Monroe County Suburbs	10.83	10.12	9.61	9.52	9.86	10.10	10.24	10.77	11.65	11.21	13.33	13.37	15.32

**Charter schools not included due to missing and unreliable data*

Table 4. Chronic Absenteeism Rates in Monroe County: Elementary Schools (1st – 8th Grade)

School District	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20*	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24	2024-25
Brighton	4.7%	6.3%	0.0%	15.3%	13.7%	15.3%	12.3%	11.8%
Brockport	10.0%	10.5%	0.0%	3.9%	33.4%	21.6%	19.8%	19.9%
Churchville-Chili	5.9%	7.1%	0.0%	5.2%	20.5%	16.6%	15.2%	15.4%
East Irondequoit	12.1%	10.5%	0.0%	16.4%	28.0%	26.8%	25.7%	26.0%
East Rochester	13.0%	13.5%	0.0%	18.0%	27.9%	26.5%	20.4%	18.3%
Fairport	4.3%	4.4%	0.0%	6.3%	12.6%	11.6%	9.9%	10.4%
Gates-Chili	9.1%	9.5%	0.0%	20.3%	27.1%	22.6%	17.6%	20.0%
Greece	**13.8%**	**13.0%**	**0.0%**	**14.4%**	**32.2%**	**17.2%**	**14.1%**	**16.0%**
Hilton	0.0%	9.1%	0.0%	23.6%	23.3%	20.6%	14.8%	16.2%
Honeoye Falls-Lima	3.0%	3.5%	0.0%	6.2%	17.9%	12.5%	10.3%	9.5%
Penfield	3.8%	3.6%	0.0%	2.5%	13.5%	12.3%	9.8%	11.0%
Pittsford	3.7%	4.5%	0.0%	5.5%	10.4%	10.7%	7.5%	8.5%
Rochester	34.0%	37.6%	0.0%	39.7%	65.2%	58.3%	59.2%	57.7%
Rush-Henrietta	7.4%	7.8%	0.0%	8.3%	20.6%	18.7%	15.9%	16.2%
Spencerport	6.0%	6.7%	0.0%	12.8%	22.5%	17.8%	15.9%	17.4%
Webster	5.6%	6.0%	0.0%	11.1%	16.2%	16.4%	13.2%	13.6%
West Irondequoit	8.5%	8.4%	0.0%	6.9%	21.7%	17.4%	13.9%	15.0%
Wheatland-Chili	9.2%	13.6%	0.0%	13.1%	23.6%	24.4%	18.9%	19.9%
Monroe County Suburbs	7.1%	7.9%	0.0%	10.8%	21.1%	17.0%	14.0%	14.9%

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.

Greece (16% relative increase, 2.2 percentage point increase) stood out for coming the closest to reducing absenteeism back to pre-pandemic norms relative to the 2017-2018 school year. 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. The community school model is particularly well suited to identifying barriers to attendance and securing resources to support families in overcoming those barriers. The Greece Central School District remains middle of the pack among school districts in Monroe County when it comes to chronic absenteeism overall; however, when we compare districts by the number of students living in economically disadvantaged households, Greece again stands out. All the school districts with lower rates of chronic absenteeism than Greece (61% economically disadvantaged) serve student populations with far fewer economically disadvantaged households. For instance, Churchville-Chili is 35% disadvantaged, with only a marginally lower chronic absenteeism rate (15.4% vs 16%). Even some school districts with higher rates of chronic absenteeism than Greece serve far more economically stable student populations, like Hilton (26% disadvantaged, 16.2% chronically absent) and Spencerport (35% disadvantaged, 17.4% chronically absent).

When we drill down even further, we see that Longridge Elementary in Greece, which is known for being a longstanding community school, has significantly reduced its chronic absenteeism *below* pre-pandemic levels from 18.5% in 2017-2018 to 6.4% in 2024-2025. Demographically, Longridge is quite diverse, with 60% students of color and a student population that is 79% economically disadvantaged. This is encouraging, given that many of the schools with the highest rates of chronic absenteeism in Monroe County also serve more diverse and higher needs populations.

Table 5. Chronic Absenteeism Rates by Year at Longridge Elementary in Greece, NY

School Year	Chronic Absenteeism Rate
2017-18	18.5%
2018-19	15.7%
2019-20*	0%
2020-21	15.6%
2021-22	33.7%
2022-23	9.0%
2023-24	5.9%
2024-25	6.4%

Table 6. Chronic Absenteeism Rates by Demographic Category at Longridge Elementary in Greece, NY

Demographic Category	2024-25 Enrollment	%
All Students	754	
Female	349	46%
Male	405	54%
Asian/Pacific Islander	46	6%
Black	142	19%
Hispanic	186	25%
Multiracial	78	10%
White	302	40%
Economically Disadvantaged	593	79%
Not Economically Disadvantaged	161	21%
General Education Students	615	82%
Students with Disabilities	139	18%
Not English Language Learners	701	93%
English Language Learners	53	7%

Table 7. Chronic Absenteeism Rates in Monroe County: High Schools (9th-12th Grade)

School District	2017-18	2018-19	2019-20*	2020-21	2021-22	2022-23	2023-24	2024-25
Brighton	8.4%	9.6%	0.0%	20.3%	16.3%	14.2%	14.9%	15.4%
Brockport	16.2%	14.1%	0.0%	4.1%	29.4%	25.2%	24.5%	28.4%
Churchville-Chili	11.5%	10.8%	0.0%	16.1%	20.9%	18.0%	20.8%	14.5%
East Irondequoit	16.9%	16.0%	0.0%	8.3%	28.6%	24.6%	20.3%	22.3%
East Rochester	20.1%	14.0%	0.0%	5.9%	30.0%	25.7%	26.5%	23.3%
Fairport	11.7%	11.1%	0.0%	13.7%	19.9%	16.7%	14.6%	14.9%
Gates Chili	16.1%	16.6%	0.0%	30.0%	37.6%	34.3%	25.2%	32.8%
Greece	19.6%	21.1%	0.0%	13.1%	39.7%	24.3%	22.2%	24.8%
Hilton	0.0%	11.2%	0.0%	31.6%	25.7%	22.5%	18.4%	16.8%
Honeoye Falls-Lima	8.6%	9.4%	0.0%	5.6%	20.0%	16.9%	15.7%	17.5%
Penfield	8.3%	8.4%	0.0%	5.2%	17.8%	14.6%	14.0%	14.3%
Pittsford	7.2%	6.9%	0.0%	9.4%	12.8%	11.0%	9.8%	14.3%
Rochester	54.0%	59.9%	0.0%	47.2%	72.7%	71.8%	70.2%	71.5%
Rush-Henrietta	16.0%	17.1%	0.0%	12.7%	25.2%	23.2%	22.8%	25.1%
Spencerport	13.5%	13.4%	0.0%	26.6%	23.7%	25.8%	25.2%	24.5%
Webster	9.5%	9.3%	0.0%	3.6%	8.6%	20.6%	17.9%	17.6%
West Irondequoit	13.3%	16.8%	0.0%	40.3%	31.6%	26.9%	19.2%	18.6%
Wheatland-Chili	14.6%	19.9%	0.0%	19.5%	29.3%	23.2%	27.8%	31.6%
Monroe County Suburbs	12.4%	13.3%	0.0%	15.5%	24.1%	21.1%	19.1%	20.3%

Rates of chronic absenteeism in high school were lowest in Penfield, Pittsford, and Churchville-Chili for the 2024-2025 school year. Rates were highest in Rochester, Gates-Chili, and Wheatland-Chili. More than seven out of ten RCSD high school students miss more than 10 percent of school days each year, affecting not only their grades and ability to pass classes, but also their likelihood of graduating on time and their future opportunities for post-secondary education and gainful employment.

For bright spots, several districts stand out based on different metrics. Churchville-Chili had the lowest absolute increase in chronic absenteeism (3 percentage points) since 2017-2018, while West Irondequoit had the lowest absolute increase since 2018-2019 (1.8 percentage points). Greece once again had one of the smallest increases in chronic absenteeism and was the leader for the greatest absolute reduction (14.9 percentage points) in chronic absenteeism from its peak in 2021-2022.

Survey Design and Collection

The Center for Teen Empowerment (TE), a nonprofit in Rochester, NY, hires dozens of teenagers each fall to work as youth organizers during the school year. As part of the application process, students are asked to provide demographic information, as well as the school they attend. In the fall of 2024, The Children's Agenda partnered with TE to add questions to the application about absenteeism. We used the Reasons for Chronic Absenteeism Survey[11] as our template, which we adapted and shortened to keep the application a manageable length. Applicants were given a list of reasons for missing school in the past year and asked to check all that apply. Though respondents were not randomly sampled, the number of survey responses (157) was robust enough to provide some insights into the reasons students were missing school locally. The same questions were asked again in the fall of 2025, adding 145 more responses.[12]

Respondents primarily attended the Rochester City School District (72%) or a charter school (16%); most identified themselves as African American (73%) or Latino/a/e (12%). More of the respondents were female (56%) than male. The results of the survey are most applicable to students living in Rochester who are African American. We believe the survey results provide valuable insights into the unique challenges facing students in the City of Rochester, and fully acknowledge the need for a broader survey across all school districts in Monroe County. **In the future, we would recommend the Monroe County Youth Risk Behavior Survey include questions related to absenteeism to provide that representative sample across the county.**

[11] Brundage, A., Moulton, S., & Castillo, J. (2020). Reasons for Chronic Absenteeism (RCA-BV).

[12] We did not track which survey respondents applied to TE both years. About 85% of applicants are new each year. However, any students who applied both years were reflecting on their previous year's absences and therefore should be providing two distinct survey responses.

Survey Results

The survey results show that students missed school for a combination of reasons, including health, family emergencies, transportation issues, being suspended, mental health challenges, and taking care of relatives. Unsurprisingly, illness was the most common reason students missed school (79%).

Table 8. The Missing Piece: What Students Say are the Reasons They Miss School

	List of Reasons for Absences	2024 (N = 157)	2025 (N = 145)	Combined (N=302)
1	I was sick	82%	77%	79%
2	I had a family emergency (death, illness, injury, drama)	36%	39%	38%
3	I had trouble getting to school (car trouble, missing the bus, bus was late, or bad weather)	43%	23%	33%
4	I was too sad, depressed or anxious/upset to attend school	24%	27%	25%
5	I was suspended	27%	23%	25%
6	I had to take care of or help a family member (child, brother/sister, relative)	23%	26%	25%
7	Other	15%	10%	13%
8	I did not feel safe attending school	7%	13%	10%
9	I did not feel safe on my way to or from school	8%	11%	9%
10	I did not have the right or clean clothes or supplies for school	8%	11%	9%
11	My school is not a nice place to attend (people are not nice, people don't care about others, unfair rules, etc.)	4%	14%	9%
12	I did not want to be teased or bullied	6%	9%	8%
13	I had to work	4%	9%	7%
14	My school work was not finished	2%	7%	4%
15	My parents or grandparents think it's ok if I miss school	4%	3%	3%
16	I am not missed when I don't attend school	3%	-	2%

What stood out was the number of family emergencies (38%), which speaks to how **unforeseen circumstances at home may pull students away from school for extended periods of time.** Transportation issues were also common, though it declined more than any response year over year from 43 percent to 23 percent. For context,

in a recently released national survey by RAND, only 3 percent of respondents reported a lack of transportation to school as a reason for absenteeism.[13]

Mental health/depression, being suspended from school, and having to watch a sibling or relative were the next most common reasons, impacting 1 in 4 students each (25%). One of the lowest responses was "My parents or grandparents think it's ok if I miss school" (3%). This seems to contradict the current emphasis placed on parent awareness as a key strategy to improve attendance. What is far more evident is that **personal and community level circumstances are creating barriers to attendance**.

> *"A lot of our families don't think the school will understand if parents tell them, "listen, we're homeless right now, we don't have transportation, I'm sick, so the child can't get to school". If families don't feel as if the people that they're communicating this stuff to are going to listen to them and be genuine about what they're saying to them, they're not going to open up. They're not going to speak to the school or the district or anyone for that matter. And we have to fix that because we need open communication between our families, the district, and the schools because, if open communication is not option, then how are we helping our children and our families?"*
>
> *– Qutisha, parent advocate*

Barrier: Transportation Challenges

To better understand how transportation challenges may impact chronic absenteeism, The Children's Agenda requested school busing data from RCSD and seven suburban districts in Monroe County. RCSD reported a high frequency of delays on both morning and afternoon routes, with the most cited reason being a shortage of bus drivers and monitors. In addition to an acute labor shortage of bus drivers, RCSD must also service an unusually large number of bus routes to comply with state and local policies. For parents to be guaranteed busing for their children, they must select a school at least 1.5 miles away – the state cutoff for transportation reimbursement – thereby creating longer and less efficient bus routes. RCSD coordinates transportation not only for the large number of students enrolled in the District, but also for students enrolled in charter, parochial and private schools, and students who are transported for the Urban-Suburban program. Between the multiple busing

[13] Diliberti, et al., (2025). Chronic Absenteeism Still a Struggle in 2024–2025. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA956-34.html#fn2

companies RCSD contracts with, **thousands of students** were affected by late buses each month in the 2023-24 school year.[14]

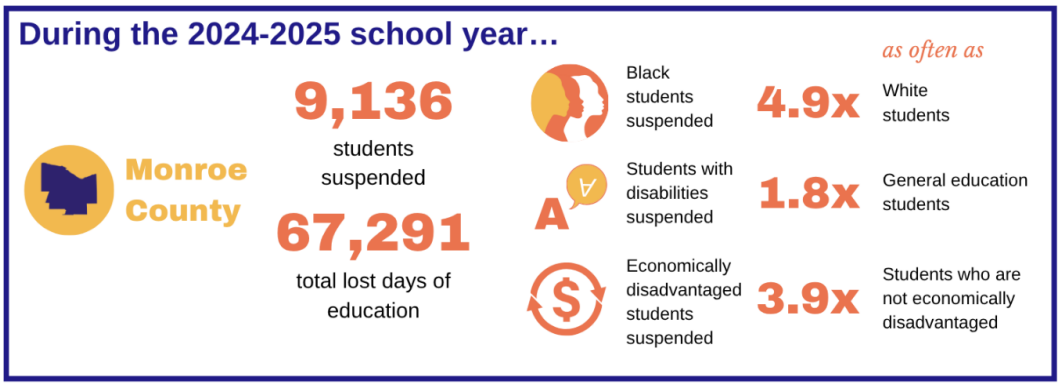
Of the six suburban districts that responded to The Children's Agenda's Freedom of Information Law request, only one, Greece CSD, reported tracking school bus delays. The remaining districts indicated that they do not track delays or do not have bus delays "other than in unique circumstances due to bus breakdowns, weather-related issues, or bus accidents," as one district responded to our FOIL request. Though the labor shortage of bus drivers is nationwide, the impact locally appears to be greater in the city of Rochester than in the suburban districts.

> *"It all depends on what they do and how they do the busing. You have some buses that do come in front of the houses. You have some buses stop and get the kids at the corners. But, you know, right now it's not safe sitting out there on the corners no more. One high school only has an RTS bus stop, so if the student missed the RTS school bus, that's it. They have to be home until the next day. So, we need to look at that a little bit different. The district has to look at that a little bit different.*
>
> *– Chrissy, parent advocate*

Barrier: Suspensions and Student Discipline

Exclusionary discipline is a policy choice by school districts, and in the 2024-2025 school year, students across New York State lost at least 840,067 days of instruction as a result.[15] We say "at least" because it is widely known that suspensions are underreported, and many students are sent home informally without any documentation. Reducing exclusionary discipline is one of the most straightforward ways to improve student attendance, and it is something that schools largely control themselves. School districts should be investing in alternatives to suspensions like restorative practices, revising student discipline policies to make suspension a last resort, and providing professional development and accountability to staff for following those policies. The survey has an overrepresentation of African American students, who are consistently more likely to be suspended than their White peers. Countywide, Black students were suspended nearly five times as often as their White peers in the 2024-2025 school year.[16] That 25 percent of respondents to our survey reported being suspended in the last year speaks to how frequent and detrimental exclusionary discipline can be for students of color.

[14] This data was provided by a FOIL request to RCSD.
[15] See https://thechildrensagenda.org/publications/sns-fact-sheet-for-new-york-in-2024-25/
[16] See previous.



There is a bill under consideration in the New York State Legislature called Solutions Not Suspensions that would put common sense guardrails on the use of exclusionary discipline. The major provisions of the bill would:

- Require school codes of conduct to include restorative approaches to discipline and proactively foster a positive school climate;
- Limit the use of suspensions in Pre-K through 3rd grade to only the most serious behaviors;
- Shorten the maximum length of suspension from 180 to 20 school days (except when required by federal law);
- Require that students who are suspended receive academic instruction and the opportunity to complete assignments, take exams and earn credit; and
- Require charter schools to follow state education law on student behavior and discipline.

"Our family suffered a house fire. My children lost everything. Two days later, the children go to school, and my daughter was in an altercation. Now, be it the trauma of the loss, poor choices, perhaps a combination of both, there were no emotional supports offered by the school after this tragic event. She was suspended for 140 days.
I watched right before my eyes her focus change: from discussion of what college she wanted to attend to no talks at all about college anymore to this day. From a happy and energetic child to a child that just stayed before the computer and slept."

- Pauletta, parent advocate

Barrier: Mental Health and Depression

For the past decade, the prevalence of depression, suicidal ideation, and self-harm among youth has increased to what the American Academy of Pediatrics has described as a "National Emergency."[17] The mental health struggles young people are going through have a direct impact on their education, as mental health plays a critical role in student motivation, concentration, and attendance. While the survey conducted by TCA primarily focuses on students in Rochester, we have both national- and county-level data to suggest mental health is also a serious contributor to attendance issues in the suburbs. In the previously mentioned national survey by RAND, the second most common reason youth provided for being absent, after sickness, was "felt down or anxious."[18]

Every two years, Monroe County administers the Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) to thousands of high school students across the county. The YRBS includes a series of questions about student mental health. Key findings from the 2023-2024 Monroe County Youth Risk Behavior Survey[19] include:

- "45% of girls reported they have serious difficulty concentrating, remembering or making decisions because of mental or emotional challenges, compared to 22% of boys.
- 34% of girls reported feeling so sad or hopeless for two or more weeks in a row in the past year that they stopped doing usual activities (a symptom of depression), compared to 17% of boys.
- 52% of students who identify as gay, lesbian, bisexual and/or transgender reported… (signs of depression)."

School districts cannot do everything to solve the student mental health crisis. However, there are opportunities for school districts to connect students to resources. Mental health satellite clinics have expanded into dozens of schools throughout Monroe County over the last five years. These clinics are created at a marginal up-front cost to districts and then sustained through billing of health insurance. With thoughtful planning and collaboration, every high school and middle school student in Monroe County can have access to mental health resources at their school.

> *"And when we look at middle schools and high schools, not just in our district, but across the board, one of the quickest things that gets cut are the social emotional supports. Right? So then students don't have a place to go when they're overwhelmed, and their safe place is home, and they don't want to leave home."*
>
> *- Eva, parent advocate*

[17] American Academy of Pediatrics, 2021. https://www.aap.org/en/advocacy/child-and-adolescent-healthy-mentaldevelopment/aap-aacap-cha-declaration-of-a-national-emergency-in-child-and-adolescent-mental-health/

[18] Diliberti, et al., (2025). Chronic Absenteeism Still a Struggle in 2024–2025. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA956-34.html#fn2

[19] See Monroe County, NY - Youth Risk Behavior Survey

The particularly high prevalence of symptoms of depression among female and LGBTQ+ students demands more attention. At the very least, school districts should design mental health awareness and outreach campaigns tailored specifically to female and LGBTQ+ students.

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 to better coordinate community resources, deepen engagement with families and students, identify root causes for absenteeism, and address chronic absenteeism.

> *"And you know, a lot of us has issues of homelessness or other situations that a lot of people don't know about. It affects us, but we don't know how to go around it and not have it affect our children and their education needs. So, how can we help them? How can we reach our hands out to them to show them the support that they need for their children to make sure they get back into school?"*
>
> *– Chrissy, parent advocate*

Conclusion

Five years after the pandemic upended school attendance, chronic absenteeism remains a defining challenge for Monroe County schools. Elementary and high school rates have fallen from 2021-2022 peaks but remain far above pre-pandemic norms, and the burden is not shared evenly.

The reasons students gave for missing school in our survey—illness, family emergency, transportation challenges, suspension, mental health struggles, and caregiving duties—point to circumstances largely outside a student's control. This suggests that **improving attendance will depend less on messaging to families and more on removing the practical and structural barriers that keep students out of the classroom**.

Several of these barriers are within the direct control of policymakers and school districts. Districts can reduce reliance on exclusionary discipline by investing in restorative practices and making suspension a last resort. State lawmakers should pass the Solutions Not Suspensions Bill, which puts common sense restrictions on when suspensions may be used, and limits suspensions to only the most extreme cases in Pre-K to 3rd grade to protect those crucial formative years when students are learning to read. RCSD and its bus vendors must continue working to resolve the driver shortage and explore ways to reduce the number of bus routes. School districts and county partners can expand access to school-based mental health clinics and design outreach that specifically reaches female and LGBTQ+ students, who are disproportionately impacted by symptoms of depression. Finally, New York State should increase funding for the community school model, which has shown particular promise in the Greece Central School District as a means to reducing absenteeism and is a proven model for leveraging community resources to meet student and family needs.

There is not one single solution to tackling the absenteeism crisis, but there are practical things school districts and New York State can do to lessen barriers for students. Now that so much time has passed, these numbers are starting to look like the new normal, and that is very troubling. **We should not accept that 1 out of 3 high school students in Monroe County is chronically absent.** We hope this report is a call to action for state lawmakers and communities, and the first step is checking in with students to find out the real barriers they are facing.

Appendix

Table A1. Survey Respondent Demographics by School Attended

School District	2024 (N=157)	2025 (N=145)	Combined (N=302)
RCSD	71%	72%	72%
Charter	15%	18%	16%
Suburb	6%	7%	7%
No School Listed	6%	3%	4%
Online/GED	1%	0%	1%
Private	1%	1%	1%

Table A2. Survey Respondent Demographics by Race/Ethnicity

Race/Ethnicity	2024 (N=157)	2025 (N=145)	Combined (N=302)
African American	75%	71%	73%
Latino/a/e	10%	15%	12%
Multiracial	7%	3%	5%
Caucasian	3%	3%	3%
Native American	1%	3%	2%
Jamaican	1%	1%	1%
Asian	1%	4%	2%
Blank	1%	1%	1%

Table A3. Survey Respondent Demographics by Gender

Gender	2024 (N=157)	2025 (N=145)	Combined (N=302)
Male	45%	42%	44%
Female	55%	57%	56%
Non-Binary	0%	1%	0%

Table A4. Charter Elementary Schools in Monroe County

	2023-24		2024-25	
Charter School	Enrollment	Chronic Absenteeism Rate	Enrollment	Chronic Absenteeism Rate
Academy of Health Sciences	447	59.7%	465	66.2%
Citizenship-Science Academy	185	45.9%	297	38.4%
Discovery Charter School	265	46.4%	265	43%
Eugenio Maria De Hostos CS	761	58.9%	745	54.4%
Exploration Ele CS - Science-Technology	374	42.2%	330	97%
Genesee Community CS	187	12.8%	174	98.9%
Genesee Community CS-Flour City	93	33.3%	129	100%
Renaissance Academy - Arts	446	30.5%	436	32.3%
Rochester Academy	546	46.5%	535	32%
Rochester Academy of Science	122	51.6%	221	44.8%
Rochester Prep 3	714	49.2%	782	48%
True North Rochester Prep / Rochester Prep CS 1	777	45.2%	817	45.7%
True North Rochester Prep-West / Rochester Prep CS 2	766	44.9%	773	48.9%
University Prep - Young Men	90	72.2%	N/A	N/A
Young Women's College Prep	116	55.2%	120	66.7%

Table A5. Charter High Schools in Monroe County

	2023-24		2024-25	
Charter School	Enrollment	Chronic Absenteeism Rate	Enrollment	Chronic Absenteeism Rate
Eugenio Maria De Hostos CS	235	70.6%	268	68.3%
Rochester Academy	266	47%	267	49.1%
Rochester Academy of Science	70	62.9%	108	74.1%
True North Rochester Prep / Rochester Prep CS 1	504	63.1%	562	73%
University Prep - Young Men	325	79.4%	N/A	N/A
Vertus CS	391	87.2%	384	85.9%
Young Women's College Prep	260	70%	263	73%