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How Has Attendance in Michigan Changed Since the COVID-19 Pandemic?

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INTRODUCTION

Students who are “chronically absent” miss 10% or more school days—for example, 18 days or more in a 180-day school year, or about 2 days per month. Nationwide, chronic absenteeism rates doubled during the COVID-19 pandemic (Dee, 2024). While attendance rates have improved over the past few school years, chronic absenteeism rates across the country remain higher than they were before the pandemic (Malkus, 2024).

How has attendance in Michigan changed since the pandemic? In 2018-19 (the most recent complete pre-pandemic school year), 19.7% of students in Michigan were chronically absent. That nearly doubled to 38.5% of students in 2021-22. The state saw strong progress in 2022-23, with chronic absenteeism rates decreasing about eight percentage points to 30.8%. Yet, in 2023-24, chronic absenteeism rates remained nearly as high, at 29.5% of students (FutureEd, 2024). Thus, attendance overall has improved since the height of the pandemic but remains about 10 percentage points (pp) higher than pre-pandemic levels.

This brief provides a closer look at how chronic absenteeism and average attendance rates have changed in Michigan since the pandemic. I used publicly available school-level attendance to analyze patterns for schools with different levels of pre-pandemic chronic absenteeism. I also looked specifically at the trends for the Detroit Public Schools Community District (DPSCD) and Detroit charter schools.

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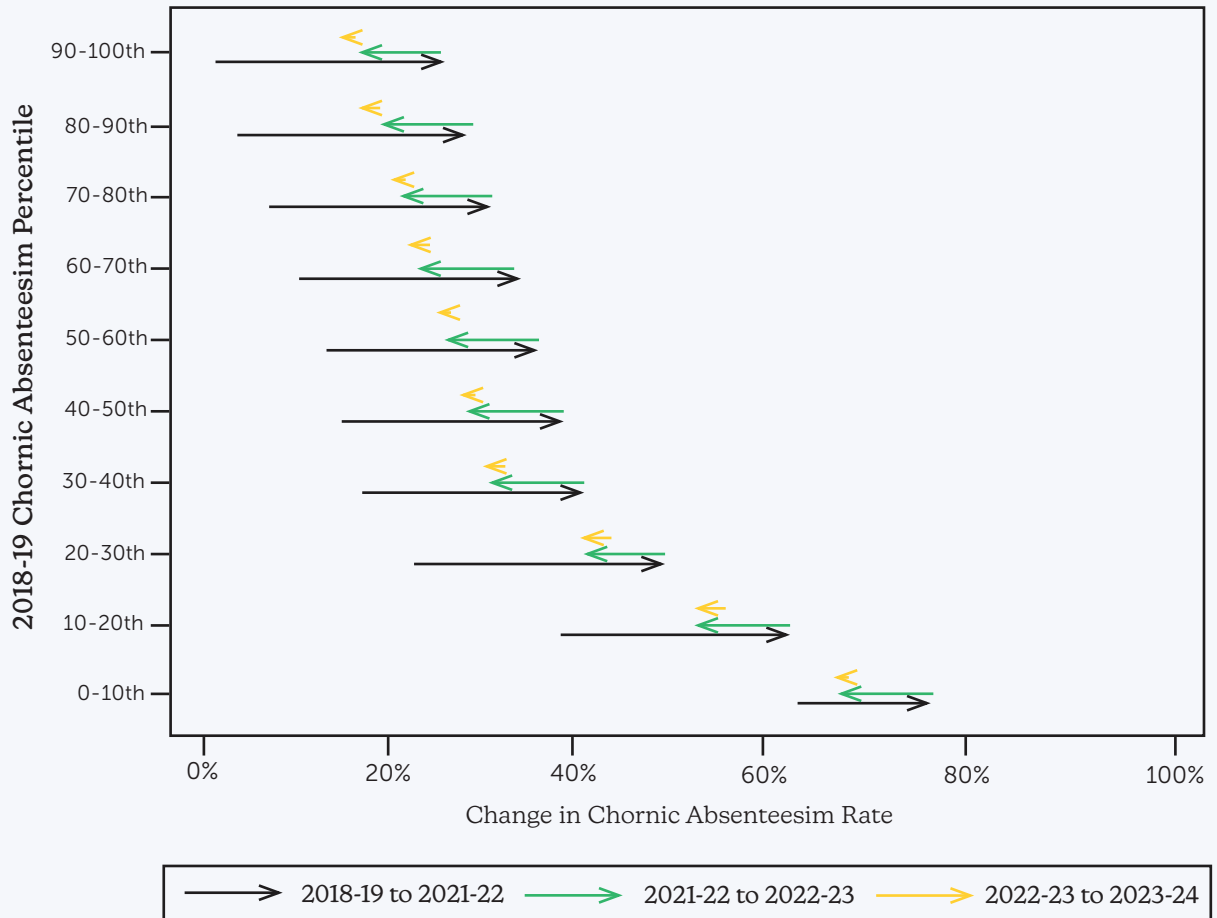
KEY FINDINGS:

- Changes in attendance over time have been, on average, similar in lower- and higher-absenteeism districts alike.
- The persistently higher rates of chronic absenteeism in Michigan translate, on average, to an additional 4 days absent in a 180-day-school year, relative to 2018-19. In other words, the average Michigan student is missing an additional day of school every other month.
- DPSCD's chronic absenteeism rate remains higher than that of Detroit charter schools, but DPSCD has had a stronger post-pandemic recovery in attendance than Detroit charter schools on average.

STATEWIDE CHANGES IN ATTENDANCE

Figure 1 shows changes in chronic absenteeism rates by pre-pandemic chronic absenteeism percentile. For example, schools with the lowest pre-pandemic absenteeism rates are in the 90-100th percentile, and those with the highest pre-pandemic rates are in the 0-10th percentile. The arrows show the change in chronic absenteeism rates over time. For example, the black arrows show chronic absenteeism increasing from 2018-19 to 2021-22 (left to right). The green arrows show chronic absenteeism then decreasing from 2021-22 to 2022-23 (right to left); and the yellow arrows are short or in some cases only arrowheads, showing the minimal change from 2022-23 to 2023-24. It is striking how uniform, on average, these changes over time have been across the state. Lower-absenteeism and higher-absenteeism schools similarly saw chronic absenteeism rates nearly double from pre-pandemic to 2021-22, a similar-sized decrease in 2022-23, and stagnation in 2023-24.

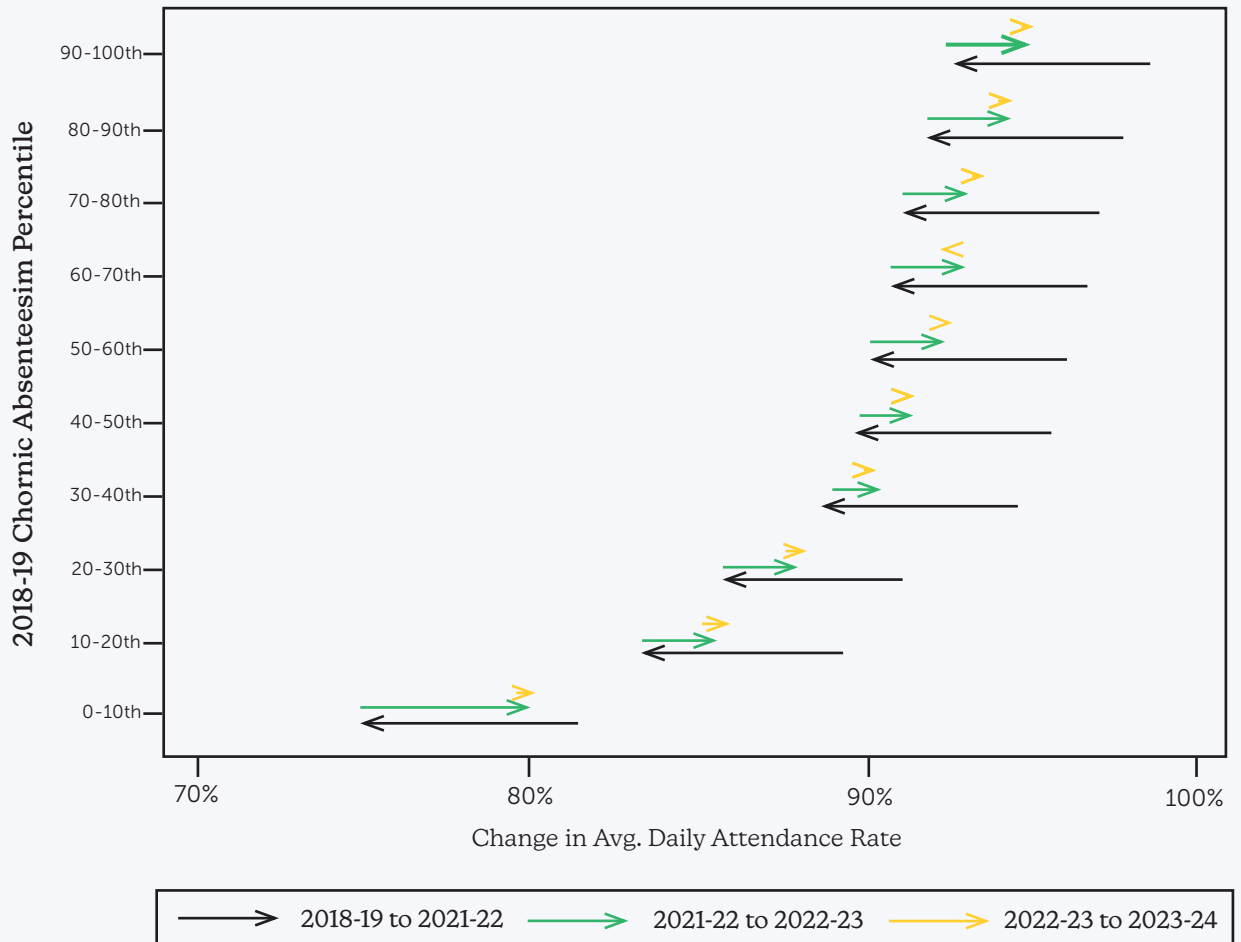
Figure 1: Changes In Chronic Absenteeism In Michigan



This uniformity is largely also true for changes in average attendance rates. As shown in Figure 2, on average, attendance rates fell across the board between 2018-19 and 2021-22, improved at similar rates in 2022-23, and changed very little in 2023-24. These lower average attendance rates for 2023-24, compared to pre-pandemic, mean that Michigan students are absent an additional 4 days in a 180-day school year, or about one additional absence every other month. That said, there has been a slightly steeper drop in average attendance rates in higher-absenteeism schools than lower-absenteeism schools on average. For example, attendance rates are still 2pp lower than pre-pandemic in 70-80th percentile schools, compared to about 4pp lower in 10-20th percentile schools.

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Figure 2: Changes In Average Attendance Rates In Michigan



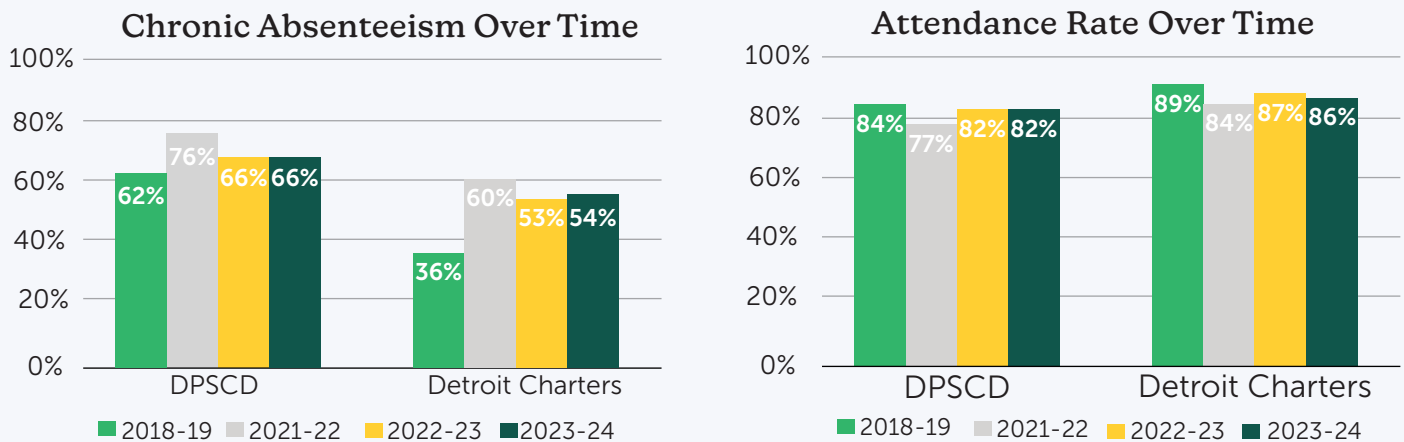
One exception to these relatively uniform patterns are the schools with the very highest rates of chronic absenteeism (i.e., 0-10th percentile). Their rates of chronic absenteeism did not increase as sharply during the pandemic, and their average attendance rates did not fall as sharply. This may be partly a function of how low attendance rates and how high chronic absenteeism rates already were in those districts. Notably, however, average attendance rates increased more between 2021-22 to 2022-23 in these highest-absenteeism schools (about 4pp) than in other schools statewide (about 1.5pp). Still, like other schools, these highest-absenteeism schools saw little change in their attendance and chronic absenteeism rates in 2023-24.

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ATTENDANCE CHANGES IN DETROIT

The statewide patterns in attendance are mirrored in Detroit, where chronic absenteeism rates are among the highest in Michigan. Figure 3 shows change over time in chronic absenteeism and attendance rates for DPSCD schools and Detroit charter schools. As with before the pandemic, chronic absenteeism rates in DPSCD are higher than in Detroit charter schools; but DPSCD has had a stronger recovery since the pandemic compared to Detroit charter schools on average. In 2023-24, DPSCD's chronic absenteeism rates remained about 4pp higher than pre-pandemic, whereas Detroit charter schools' chronic absenteeism rates were about 8pp higher than pre-pandemic. Similarly, DPSCD's attendance rate remained about 2pp lower than pre-pandemic, whereas Detroit charter schools' attendance rates remained about 3pp lower than pre-pandemic. Considering the statewide context, DPSCD stands out for its improvement since the pandemic, whereas the change over time for Detroit charter schools more closely resembles average patterns in Michigan.

Figure 3: Chronic Absenteeism And Attendance Rates In Detroit By Sector



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CONCLUSION

The relatively uniform decreases in attendance in Michigan schools suggest some common effects of the pandemic on students and their families; and the relatively uniform increases suggest some common relief from those negative impacts. That said, the stagnation in 2023-24 may mean that we have reached a new baseline post-pandemic, with some lingering negative impacts. But what are those lingering things that are keeping chronic absenteeism rates up and attendance rates down? The answer is not clear, and there likely are a lot of factors, from increased mental health issues among youth (Rapaport et al., 2024), to the proliferation of virtual forms of participation in school and work (Jacob, 2024; Parker, 2023) to weakened school-family relationships that were disrupted during the pandemic (Learning Heroes & TNTP, 2024). There may be something of a shift in how students and their families are engaging with school, but the magnitude of increased absenteeism (i.e., an additional absence every other month) does not support the idea that there has been a fundamental shift in how much students or parents care about school, as some commentators have suggested.

All that said, it is important to keep in mind that these are averages. While attendance and chronic absenteeism rates were stagnant in 2023-24, there are some schools that saw continued improvement. Likewise, there are individual students whose attendance certainly improved, even while others remained the same. We plan to conduct more detailed analyses of the available quantitative data, as well as interviews with educators and families, in the future.

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Finally, it is important to note that schools with high chronic absenteeism rates prior to the pandemic still have high rates of chronic absenteeism now. As we have shown in prior research (e.g., Singer et al., 2021), these high rates of chronic absenteeism are driven by social and economic inequalities that are outside the scope of schools or districts to address alone. Likewise, rates of chronic absenteeism for Michigan’s economically disadvantaged students remain substantially higher than for non-economically disadvantaged students, as was the case prior to the pandemic (Vincent, 2024). Consequently, focusing only on school-based efforts will not lead to dramatic increases in attendance. We need Michigan policymakers and community leaders to commit to improving the conditions for student attendance outside of school, just as the state’s educators are committed to improving conditions inside schools. This means allocating additional resources and facilitating collaboration across multiple sectors (e.g., healthcare, housing, transportation, social services) to meet student and family needs. In the meantime, schools and districts can continue to effectively and positively communicate with students and families; strengthen school-family relationships; identify the barriers to attendance that their students face; and connect them with existing resources or services.

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