PACE

COMMENTARY

Chronic Absenteeism Post-Pandemic

Let's Not Make This Our "New Normal"



AUTHORS

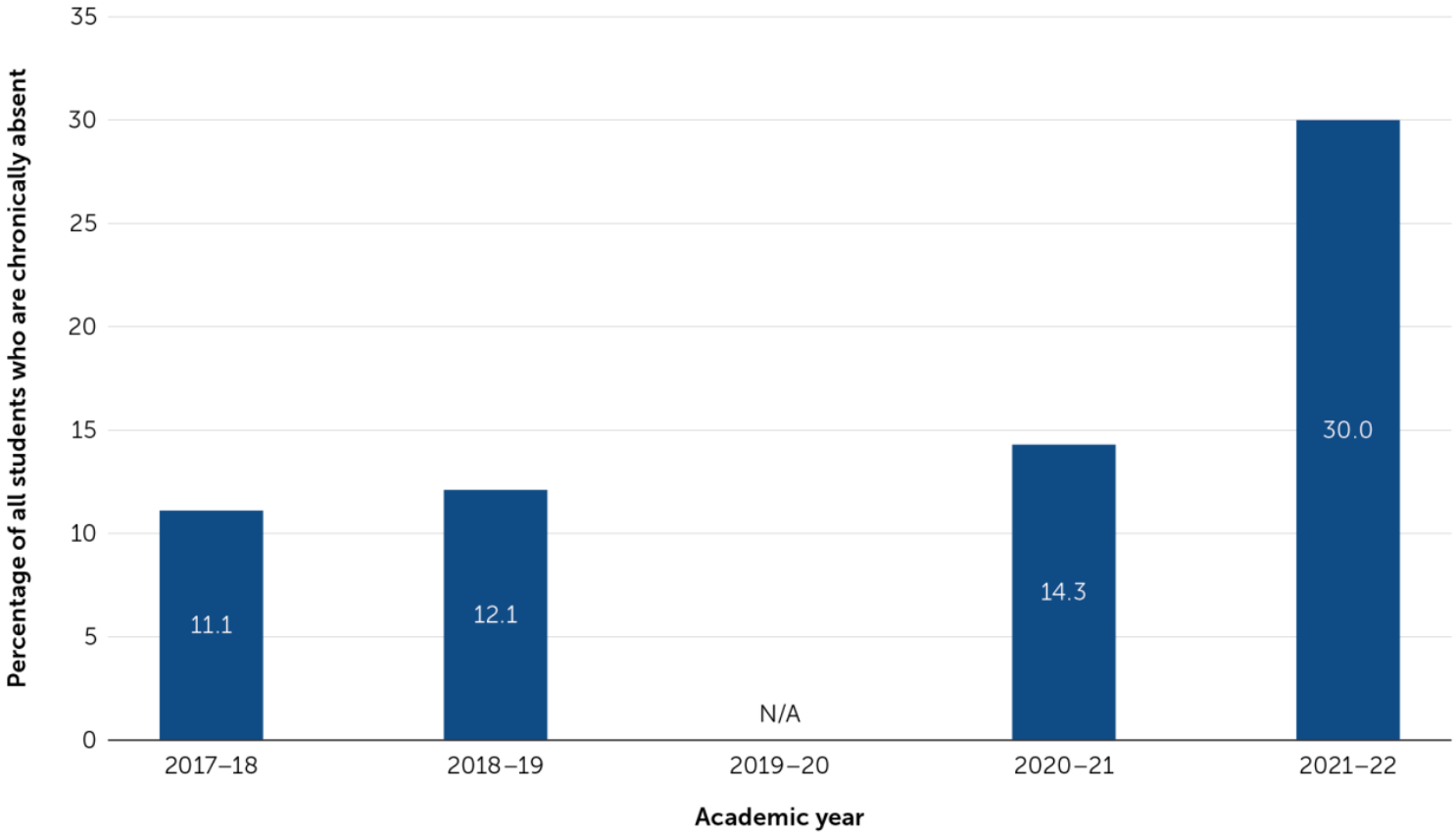
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Figure 1. Chronic Absenteeism for All Students by Year



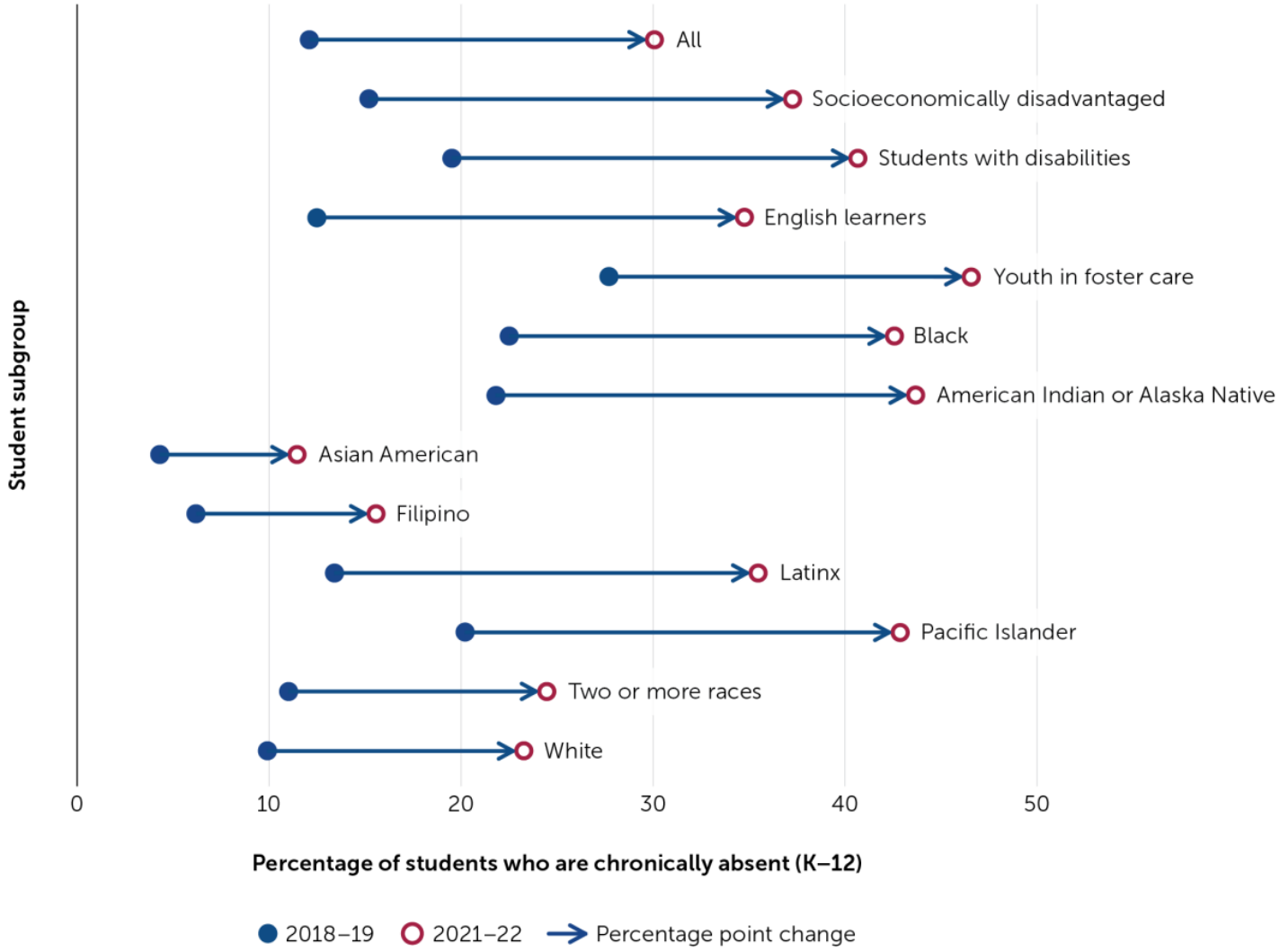
Source. Based on chronic absenteeism data from the California Department of Education.

Chronic absenteeism (when a student misses 10 percent or more of instructional days during the school year for any reason) has spiked by an alarming degree, increasing more than twofold statewide, from 14% in 2020–21 to 30% in 2021–22 (see Figure 1). This increased absenteeism during 2021–22 is, of course, not entirely surprising. When students returned to school after a year of pandemic-induced virtual learning in 2020–21, they were encouraged to stay home if they had any symptoms, and many students had to miss school to quarantine after an exposure to COVID-19. Even though the pandemic is largely behind us at this point, early warning signs show that we now face challenges with attendance that could persist into the long term; although data for the current school year (2022–23) will not be released at the state level until fall 2023, locally released data show that the patterns this year may be as worrisome as last. How do we urgently move the needle on our high rate of chronic absenteeism so that it does not become the new normal in our state?

Addressing absenteeism requires an urgent response given the lasting consequences it can have on students' outcomes, including their academic achievement and graduation. Missed classes mean missed opportunities to learn. If too many students are absent, then teachers also face challenges in teaching. This sets up a troubling cycle, especially given the need to ramp up learning to overcome academic setbacks students experienced during the pandemic.

A deeper dive into chronic absenteeism among key student subgroups reveals even more troubling patterns that have enormous equity implications for our state's most vulnerable youth populations. There were significant spikes in chronic absenteeism for all racial and ethnic subgroups between 2018–19 and 2021–22, with students of color experiencing some of the largest increases (see Figure 2). For example, rates of absenteeism for Black students increased from 23% to 43%, and rates for students from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds increased from 15% to 37%.

Figure 2. Change in Chronic Absenteeism From 2018–19 to 2021–22 by Student Subgroup

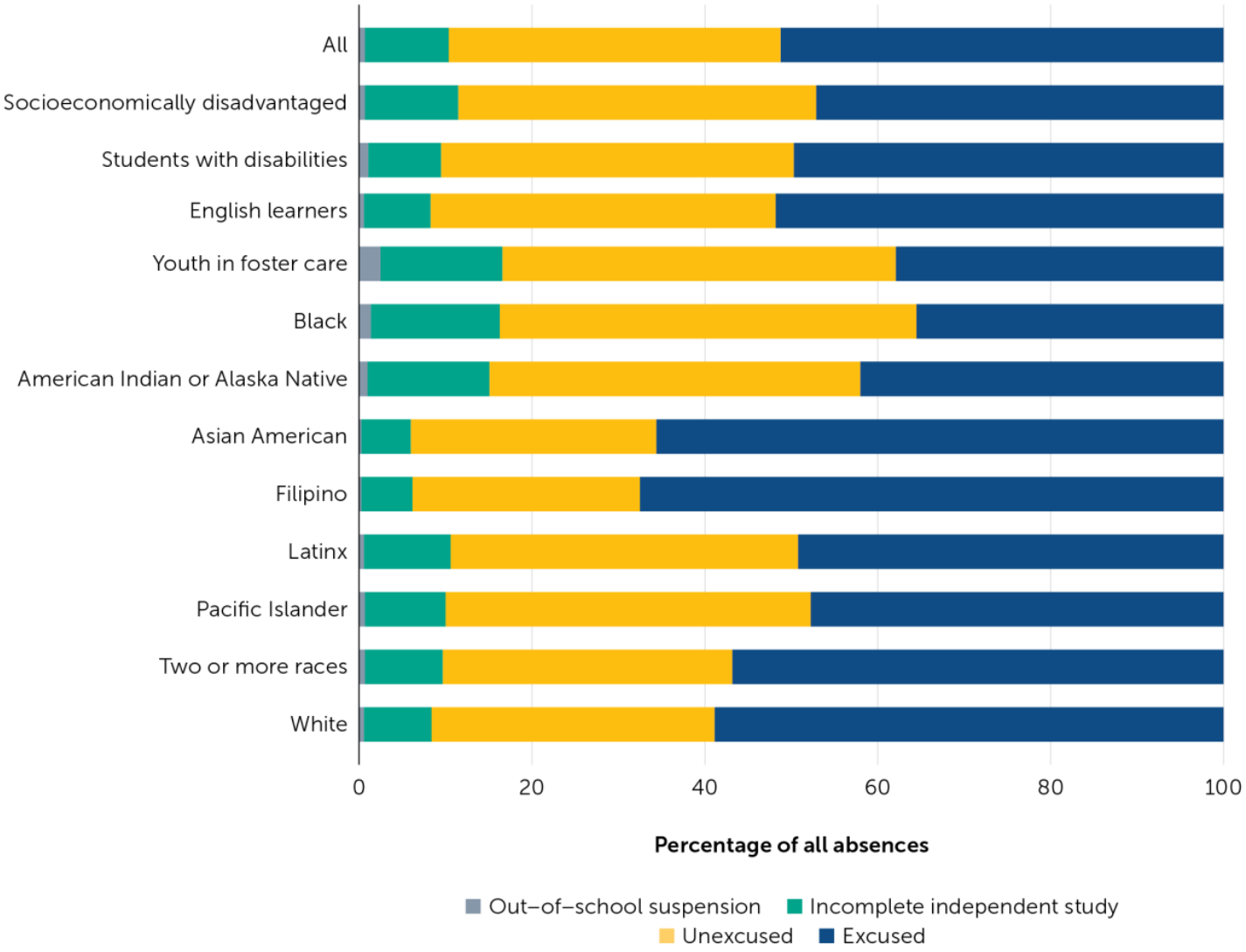


Source. Based on chronic absenteeism data from the California Department of Education.

To be considered chronically absent, students must miss 10% or more days of school (which translates to 18 or more instructional days for students enrolled the whole year), which can include a combination of excused and unexcused absences—reflecting the fact that being absent from school, regardless of the reason, can be detrimental to learning. Excused absences are ones that the school or district deems to be "legitimate" based on reasons defined in the California Education Code (Section 48205), such as a medical reason with a doctor's note. Unexcused absences are ones that schools recognize as not having a valid reason, such as missing school without permission. Accumulating too many unexcused absences places the child at risk of becoming classified as "truant." As a new PACE report shows, there are escalating punitive consequences for truancy, including court involvement.

Students who identify as Black, Native American, Latinx, and Pacific Islander have more of their absences labeled unexcused than their White, Asian American or Filipino peers (see Figure 3). The high rates of chronic absenteeism for students in these groups, plus the fact that more of their absences are unexcused, mean that they and/or their parents could face more punitive actions. Such actions include involvement with the court system for too many unexcused absences as well as greater risks of not being able to engage academically—missing opportunities to complete make-up work is a penalty for unexcused absences—as well as nonacademically, such as exclusion from extracurricular activities.

Figure 3. Reasons for Absences in 2021–22 Statewide by Student Subgroup



Source. Based on absenteeism by reason data from the California Department of Education.

WHERE DO WE GO FROM HERE?

Tackling these unprecedentedly high rates of absenteeism across our state will require multifaceted approaches, including proactive engagement with families and students, real-time data to inform decision-making, and a holistic understanding of factors that both push students out and pull them in.

- Engaging with parents and students remains the cornerstone of any strategy to promote attendance. Engagement must be grounded in positive, proactive problem-solving. Recently, Connecticut's home visitation program has shown promising results. An interdisciplinary team of educators and school personnel made home visits to families whose children struggled with attendance, proactively providing them with necessary learning and/or behavioral supports to boost attendance.
- California's schools and school districts should continue to leverage their continuous improvement processes that analyze absence data in real time to identify groups who show early warning signs of disengagement. Although past data are important for understanding prior patterns and trends, data in real time can be leveraged in preventive planning.
- Schools should continue to focus on strengthening supports aimed at more broadly tackling the learning and schooling conditions that are intertwined with absenteeism—in particular, mitigating the push-out factors and focusing on the pull-in factors. Critically, we must ask: How do we make schools safe, welcoming, and supportive spaces that draw students in?
- Finally, because the reasons for absences are multifaceted and involve challenges that schools, families, and communities face, the solutions to chronic absenteeism do not lie with schools alone—our school transportation systems, the public health system, and social welfare systems all matter.

Although confronting such large increases in absenteeism may feel like uncharted territory, the good news is that schools throughout our state were actively engaged in these approaches prior to the pandemic. Looking ahead, though, we see that the types of student groups experiencing absenteeism and the underlying reasons for chronic absenteeism may have changed, requiring an even more intensive focus on and broader outreach to groups that typically did not experience attendance challenges in the past.

Suggested citation

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