

# Disparities in Unexcused Absences Across California Schools

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This report, like all PACE publications, has been thoroughly reviewed for factual accuracy and research integrity. The authors assume full responsibility for the accuracy of the report contents.

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## Executive Summary

Finding effective ways to improve school attendance is more important than ever given the dramatic increases in chronic absence nationwide and in California. This report presents a compelling case for using data about unexcused absences to advance a more preventive, problem-solving, and equitable response to poor attendance.

When an absence is labeled unexcused, it affects how a student and their family are treated. Although students face no negative consequences for excused absences, they can be denied credit for missed work, excluded from extracurricular activities, and eventually taken to court and fined for unexcused absences. As absences accumulate, responses generally become more punitive. Yet punitive responses are unlikely to improve attendance when absences occur for reasons beyond the control of the student and their family. Rather, overuse of the unexcused-absence label could undermine efforts to partner with students and families to improve attendance.

Our analyses of statewide data show:

- During the 3 school years examined in this report (2017–18, 2018–19, and 2021–22), the percentage of absences labeled unexcused held constant at around 38 percent in California. Schools with higher percentages of unexcused absences typically had lower attendance rates while schools with lower percentages of unexcused absences had higher levels of attendance.
- Socioeconomically disadvantaged students are much more likely to have their absences labeled unexcused. This is also true for Black, Native American, Latinx, and Pacific Islander students relative to White, Asian American, and Filipino students. Black students experience the largest disparity. These disparities cannot be fully explained by poverty since they remained across differences in socioeconomic status.
- Although English learners and students with disabilities were more likely to be chronically absent, disparities in unexcused absences for these groups were relatively small compared to disparities across socioeconomic, racial, and ethnic groups.
- Preliminary data suggest that schools serving more socioeconomically disadvantaged students communicate more punitive approaches. More research is needed to understand why. The good news is some schools are “bright spots,” with high attendance rates, less frequent use of the unexcused-absence label, and fewer disparities in labeling absences as unexcused.

The report concludes with recommendations for how stakeholders can use data to detect and address disparities in the labeling of unexcused absences and advance more equitable opportunities to learn.

## Introduction

Two students are sick. Both miss 5 days of school. One student has a family physician, and their parents are familiar with school policies. This student returns to school with a doctor's note, and their five absences are excused. The other student's family cannot afford to see a doctor. This second student returns to school without a doctor's note, and their five absences are unexcused. The family receives a letter stating that their child is truant and they may be taken to court if the absenteeism continues.

This scenario happens in many schools and districts. In your district, do some students, especially those with fewer resources, end up with their absences labeled unexcused despite facing a major barrier to getting to school? If so, how does that affect the ability of your schools to partner with students and families to identify and address underlying causes of absenteeism and support engagement in school? Which student populations are most affected?

Showing up regularly to school matters. Students not only gain from curriculum and instruction but also benefit from connecting with peers and adults as well as accessing critical resources available on school campuses (Attendance Works, 2022a). When students miss school, it is easy for them to fall behind academically and socially, especially if their families lack the means to make up for lost opportunities to learn and develop at school. A growing body of research has established that students who are chronically absent from school (missing 10 percent or more of school days for any reason) are at risk of falling behind academically, getting suspended in middle school, and eventually dropping out of school (Balfanz et al., 2007; Chang & Romero, 2008; Ehrlich et al., 2014; Gottfried, 2014; Utah Education Policy Center, 2012). The continual disruptions to schooling that students experienced during the COVID-19 pandemic have made even more clear the value of being in school and the adverse impact of too many absences.

The number of students who are chronically absent from school has doubled nationwide since the pandemic began, increasing from one out of six students in the 2018–19 school year to nearly one out of three students by the end of the 2021–22 school year (Chang et al., 2022). In California, 30 percent of students—nearly 1.8 million—were chronically absent during the 2021–22 school year. This is more than twice the 12.1 percent of students chronically absent during 2018–19.

This rise in absenteeism can be attributed to several factors. Although illness and quarantine were major contributors to chronic absences during the pandemic, practitioners have shared that school staffing challenges (e.g., no bus drivers), health fears, anxiety, and the lack of a regular routine of learning have also exacerbated absenteeism. These pandemic-related challenges were layered on top of preexisting barriers to attendance, such as poor transportation, trauma, housing insecurity, lack of access to health care, and community violence (Blad, 2022; Fortin, 2022). Communities that struggled economically before the pandemic have been especially hard hit.

The highest levels of absenteeism were experienced by Native American, Black, Pacific Islander, and Latinx students as well as students who were socioeconomically disadvantaged, involved in special education, or English learners (California Department of Education, 2022c).

This jump in chronic absence occurred in tandem with significant declines in achievement between the 2018–19 and 2021–22 academic years. California students' performance on statewide assessments in language arts and math decreased statewide,<sup>1</sup> leaving large disparities intact for Black, Native American, Latinx, Pacific Islander, and socioeconomically disadvantaged students (California Department of Education, 2022b). Addressing these disparities is critical, not just for individual students but also for the economic well-being of California.

In California, state law requires districts to monitor key indicators and address education disparities as part of their Local Control and Accountability Plans (California Department of Education, n.d.-b). Chronic absence is one of these key indicators. High rates of absenteeism and large racial and ethnic disparities in the rate of absenteeism can reveal challenges that school districts face in engaging, educating, and supporting all students.

This report highlights the value of digging even deeper into attendance metrics to understand how applying the unexcused-absence label to student absences could be impeding systemwide efforts to improve attendance as well as deepening education inequities, particularly among socioeconomically disadvantaged students<sup>2</sup> and students from communities of color. Multiple years of state data show that students who are socioeconomically disadvantaged as well as those who are Black, Native American, Pacific Islander, or Latinx are much more likely to have their absences labeled unexcused.<sup>3</sup>

Understanding why these disparities exist and how they can be addressed is critically important for reducing education inequities (McNeely et al., 2001). When an absence is labeled unexcused, it affects how the student and their family are treated. For example, teachers are not required to help students make up for missed learning opportunities after unexcused absences, but they must do so for excused absences.

As unexcused absences accumulate, responses typically become more punitive and can involve denial of credit for missed work, exclusion from extracurricular activities, court appearances, and fines for students and parents. Punitive responses are unlikely to improve attendance when absences occur for reasons beyond the control of a student and their family.

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<sup>1</sup> Between 2018–19 and 2021–22, the statewide average of English language assessment scores declined from 51.1 percent to 47.1 percent of students meeting or exceeding standards. Math scores decreased from 39.7 percent to 33.4 percent of students meeting or exceeding standards.

<sup>2</sup> See Table 1 later in this report for specific criteria for socioeconomic disadvantage from the California Longitudinal Pupil Achievement Data System (CALPADS).

<sup>3</sup> For these data, see DataQuest at [dq.cde.ca.gov/dataquest](http://dq.cde.ca.gov/dataquest).

Moreover, such punitive responses may backfire. When students and families perceive that the unexcused-absence label is unfairly applied (e.g., when they did not have access to a doctor to get an excuse), they may lose trust in schools and disengage from learning (Bryk & Schneider, 2002), and strategies to improve attendance are thus less likely to succeed.

The good news is that schools and districts are uniquely well positioned to change disparities in the coding of absences. Unlike many other disparities, the locus of control for deciding whether an absence is excused versus unexcused lies within the control of school leadership, who *by law* have discretion over how absences are coded.

Data are now available from the California Department of Education (CDE) DataQuest portal on excused- and unexcused-absenteeism rates by student population, grade, and school. Educators can use these data to identify where disparities in unexcused absences exist in their schools or districts and then work with students, families, and community partners to identify and address the root causes of these disparities.

## Report Purpose

This report is for everyone who cares about improving school attendance, including policymakers, educators, advocates, community partners, families, students, researchers, and the groups helping to build capacity in schools. The recommendations given in this report can be applied at the local and state level in California as well as by other states interested in using their own data to examine disparities and determine how to improve their truancy-related practices and policies.

This report is a call to action to leverage this rich and compelling information about unexcused absences to advance a more preventive, problem-solving, and equitable response to poor attendance. We first provide an overview of current policies for labeling and responding to unexcused absences and then answer the following key questions using statewide data for California:

- What proportion of absences is unexcused?
- Can schools that label relatively few absences unexcused achieve high attendance rates?
- Are some groups of students more likely to have their absences labeled unexcused? Specifically, how does the labeling of absences vary by socioeconomic disadvantage, race and ethnicity, and English learner and disability status?
- Are some types of schools more likely to adopt and communicate punitive attendance policies? Specifically, are policies more punitive in schools that predominantly serve socioeconomically disadvantaged students?
- Are there “bright spot” schools with high overall attendance, low proportions of absences labeled unexcused, and small racial and ethnic disparities in labeling absences unexcused?

The report concludes by synthesizing the answers to these questions into recommendations for how key stakeholders can detect and address disparities in the labeling of unexcused absences, thereby advancing equitable opportunities to learn. This approach builds on long-standing efforts to advance prevention-oriented approaches to improving school attendance.

## California's Evolving Approach to Addressing Unexcused Absences

In California, state law requires children between the ages of 6 and 18 to attend school unless there is a specific exemption or a valid excuse.<sup>4</sup> Reasons for valid excused absences include illness, quarantine, funeral services for immediate family, medical appointments, and time spent with a family member on leave from active military service.<sup>5</sup> The law has been amended over time to add new valid reasons for school absence. In 2013, school administrators were given discretion, based on their assessment of a student's individual circumstances, to excuse absences for reasons not included by state law.<sup>6</sup> In 2021, mental or behavioral health needs and cultural ceremonies or events were added as reasons for excused absences.<sup>7</sup> Even in these cases, an absence typically requires proper documentation from a parent to be marked as excused. Without this documentation, students may be marked unexcused.

The distinction between excused and unexcused significantly influences the response to absences. Teachers are required to allow students to make up missed work for full credit after an excused absence but not after an unexcused absence. Schools can take further punitive actions for unexcused absences, such as denying students the opportunity to participate in extracurricular activities.

By California law, once students are absent from school three times or are late to class for more than 30 minutes three times during the school year without valid excuses, they are considered truant.<sup>8</sup> When this occurs, districts must notify parents and inform them that they could be prosecuted for their child's truancy if unexcused absences continue.<sup>9</sup> If a student has been reported as a truant three or more times in one school year and the school has sent a letter or called the parent requesting a meeting regarding their child's attendance, the student is deemed a habitual truant.<sup>10</sup> Habitual truants and students who are chronically absent may be referred to a school attendance review board (SARB; California Department of Education, n.d.-c)

<sup>4</sup> See California Compulsory Education Law, Cal. Education Code § 48200.

<sup>5</sup> See California Compulsory Education Law, Cal. Education Code § 48205.

<sup>6</sup> See California Compulsory Education Law, Cal. Education Code § 48260.

<sup>7</sup> The California Education Code was amended by Assembly Bill (AB) 516 to include cultural ceremonies and by Senate Bill (SB) 14 to include mental and behavioral health needs during the 2021–22 legislative session.

<sup>8</sup> See California Compulsory Education Law, Cal. Education Code § 48260.

<sup>9</sup> See California Compulsory Education Law, Cal. Education Code § 48260.5.

<sup>10</sup> See California Compulsory Education Law, Cal. Education Code § 48262.



or a truancy mediation program.<sup>11</sup> If unexcused absenteeism continues, courts can become involved. Courts can require participation in a community service or truancy prevention program, and they can administer fines (\$50) to students.<sup>12</sup> In addition, judges can fine parents (up to \$500 for a third or subsequent conviction) as well as order placement in a parent education and counseling program,<sup>13</sup> and parents may be prosecuted for a misdemeanor.<sup>14</sup> In California, courts cannot, however, place a child on probation solely based on truancy.<sup>15</sup>

## Punitive Approaches Are Less Effective

A growing body of research suggests that punitive approaches typically are not the best way to improve academic outcomes, including attendance, and are sometimes counterproductive (Anderson, 2020; Yaluma et al., 2022). Studies (Attendance Works & Healthy Schools Campaign, 2015; Brundage et al., 2017; Chang et al., 2019; Sullivan & Attisha, 2019) show that a large number of absences are caused by challenges experienced in the community that are beyond a student's or family's control (e.g., lack of access to health care, unreliable transportation, unstable housing, lack of safe paths to school, etc.) as well as challenges experienced in school (e.g., bullying, struggling academically, etc.). In the context of the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, students may be absent because of isolation or quarantine requirements but lack documentation, or parents may keep their children home as a precaution during a period of high viral transmission (e.g., December 2021 and January 2022). When absences are the result of such challenges, a punitive approach is not likely to be effective and may even undermine strategies that emphasize partnering with students and families to identify and address the underlying reasons that students miss school.

Research supports beginning with engagement and problem-solving rather than punitive action. A study conducted in California, for example, found that rewriting traditional truancy notifications increased their effectiveness at promoting attendance (Lasky-Fink et al., 2019). The key was making sure the notices did not begin with the state-mandated legalistic language that threatened punitive action. The more effective letters listed the specific days a student missed then offered clear information about the potential consequences of chronic absence on learning and the important role parents play in getting their children to school. The more effective letters also encouraged parents and guardians to help their children get to school.

The *Attendance Playbook* produced by FutureEd at Georgetown University and Attendance Works offers a broad understanding of how to invest in prevention (Jordan, 2020). It showcases an array of evidence-based universal "Tier 1" strategies, such as effective messaging, school-based health services, transportation supports, and breakfast in the classroom, as well as "Tier 2" early interventions, including mentoring and early-warning systems.

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<sup>11</sup> See California Compulsory Education Law, Cal. Education Code § 48263 and § 48291.

<sup>12</sup> See California Compulsory Education Law, Cal. Education Code § 48264.5(d).

<sup>13</sup> See California Compulsory Education Law, Cal. Education Code § 48293(a).

<sup>14</sup> See Cal. Penal Code § 270.1 and § 272.

<sup>15</sup> See California Juvenile Court Law, Cal. Welfare and Institutions Code § 601.



Investing in prevention and early intervention is critical. When students become involved with the legal system for truancy, they can easily become stigmatized and less likely to receive needed support from schools. A study conducted in South Carolina by the Council of State Governments Justice Center found, for example, that “an arrest, court involvement, and/or system supervision for youth who are truant or commit other low-level offenses actually decreases their likelihood of attending school and completing high school” (Weber, 2020). Investing in prevention at schools keeps students who are not engaged in criminal activity out of the legal system.

## California’s Progress Towards Less Punitive Approaches to Truancy

Over the years, multiple efforts have advanced a more supportive response to truancy. For the past decade, the California SARB, which promotes statewide policy coordination and professional development, has used its training, guidance, and Model SARB program to encourage and recognize a prevention-oriented approach to truancy. A commitment to earlier intervention is also reflected in the adoption of absenteeism as an accountability measure in the state’s plan for implementing the Every Student Succeeds Act.

California Education Code has also been changed to make approaches to truancy less punitive. In 2011, the law was amended to clarify that schools should find alternatives to suspension or expulsion when students are tardy or truant.<sup>16</sup> Assembly Bill 901, passed into law in 2020, sought to decriminalize the response to poor attendance by prohibiting holding students in secure facilities or removing them from the custody of their parents or guardians for habitual truancy.<sup>17</sup> Unfortunately, the strides taken by California to date, although necessary, may still not be sufficient to ensure equitable labeling of and response to unexcused absenteeism.

## Examining Disparities in the Designation of Unexcused Absences

To examine the proportion of absences labeled unexcused and disparities in the application of the unexcused-absence label for student absences, we used data on unexcused absences that are unique to California. Although many states release data on chronic absences, in November 2020 California became the first state to publish data on excused and unexcused absences and suspensions. Specifically, we used data on absenteeism from the DataQuest database and publicly available data files for school years 2017–18, 2018–19, and 2021–22.

Because of challenges with data quality and consistency in coding attendance data during hybrid and distance learning, CDE did not release any data for the 2019–20 school year, and we excluded data from 2020–21 because many districts maintained distance learning through spring 2021.

<sup>16</sup> See Cal. Education Code § 48900(w)(1).

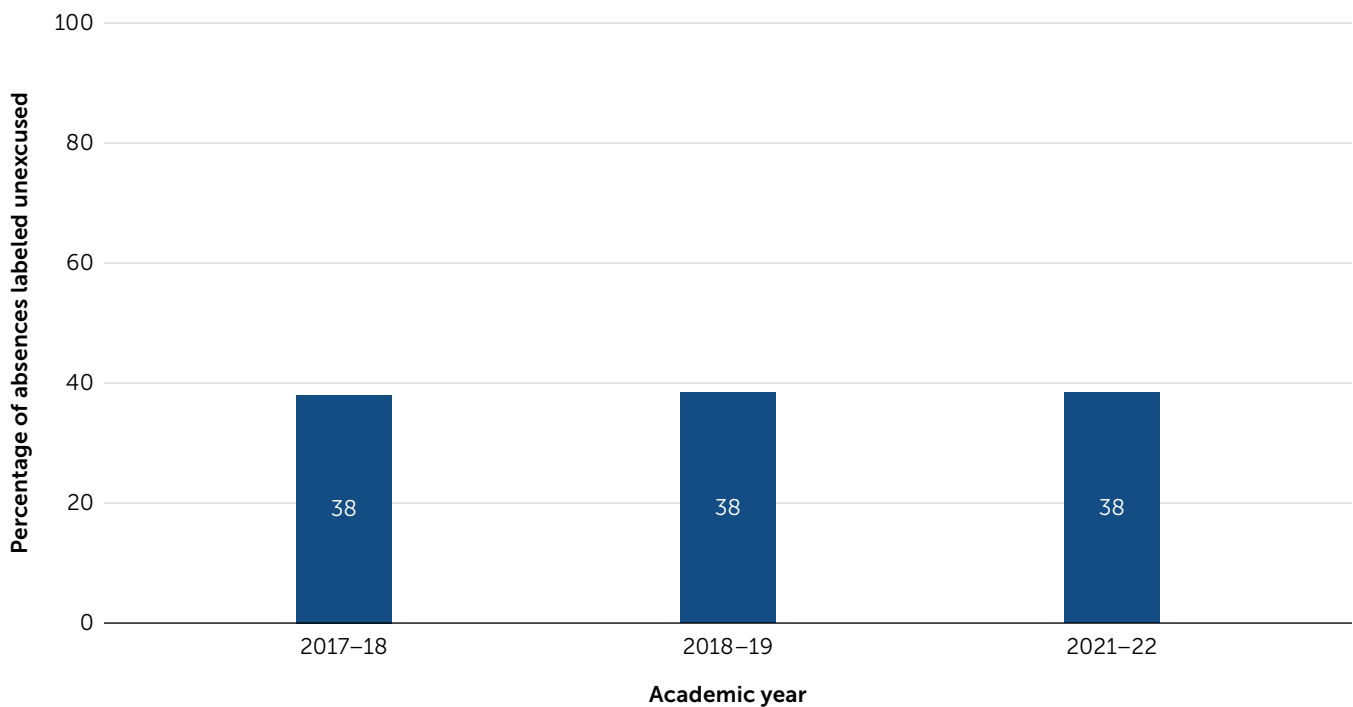
<sup>17</sup> See Cal. AB 901 (2019–20 legislative session), Chapter 323, Section 2 (Cal. Stat. 2020).

To answer the question of how schools inform students and families about attendance policies, we conducted a scan of district and school attendance policies for a random sample of 40 middle and high schools for the 2021–22 school year. See Appendix A for more details about methods.

### What Proportion of Absences Is Unexcused?

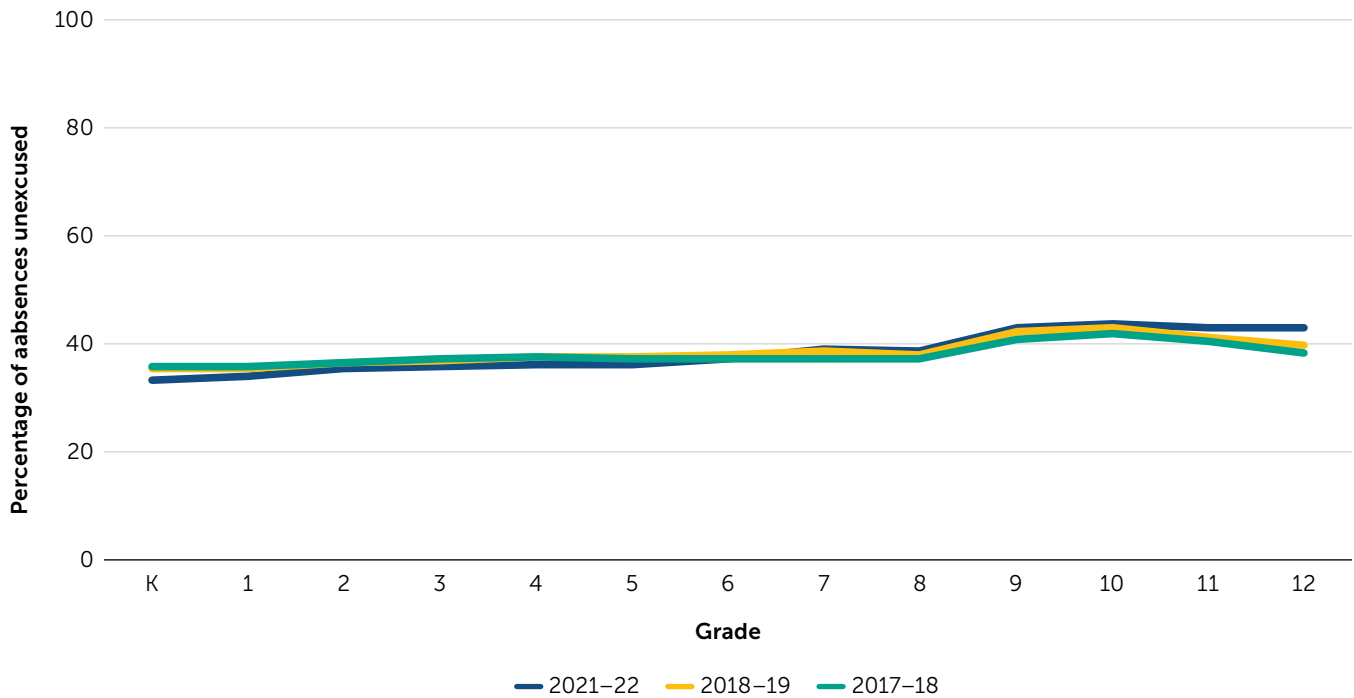
The purpose of this first question is to establish a baseline estimate to study disparities and examine trends over time. In the 2 school years prior to the COVID-19 pandemic (2017–18 and 2018–19), 38 percent of all student absences were labeled unexcused (Figure 1). This trend continued once students returned to school full time. During 2021–22, schools again labeled 38 percent of all student absences unexcused.

**Figure 1.** Percentage of student absences labeled unexcused in Grades K–12 in regular (nonalternative) schools



High school students were most likely to have their absences marked unexcused. In 2021–22, approximately 43 percent of absences for students in Grades 9–12 were unexcused, compared to less than 35 percent of absences for students in earlier grades (Figure 2). This pattern was similar to the 2017–18 and 2018–19 school years.

**Figure 2.** Percentage of absences labeled unexcused by grade and year in regular (nonalternative) K–12 schools



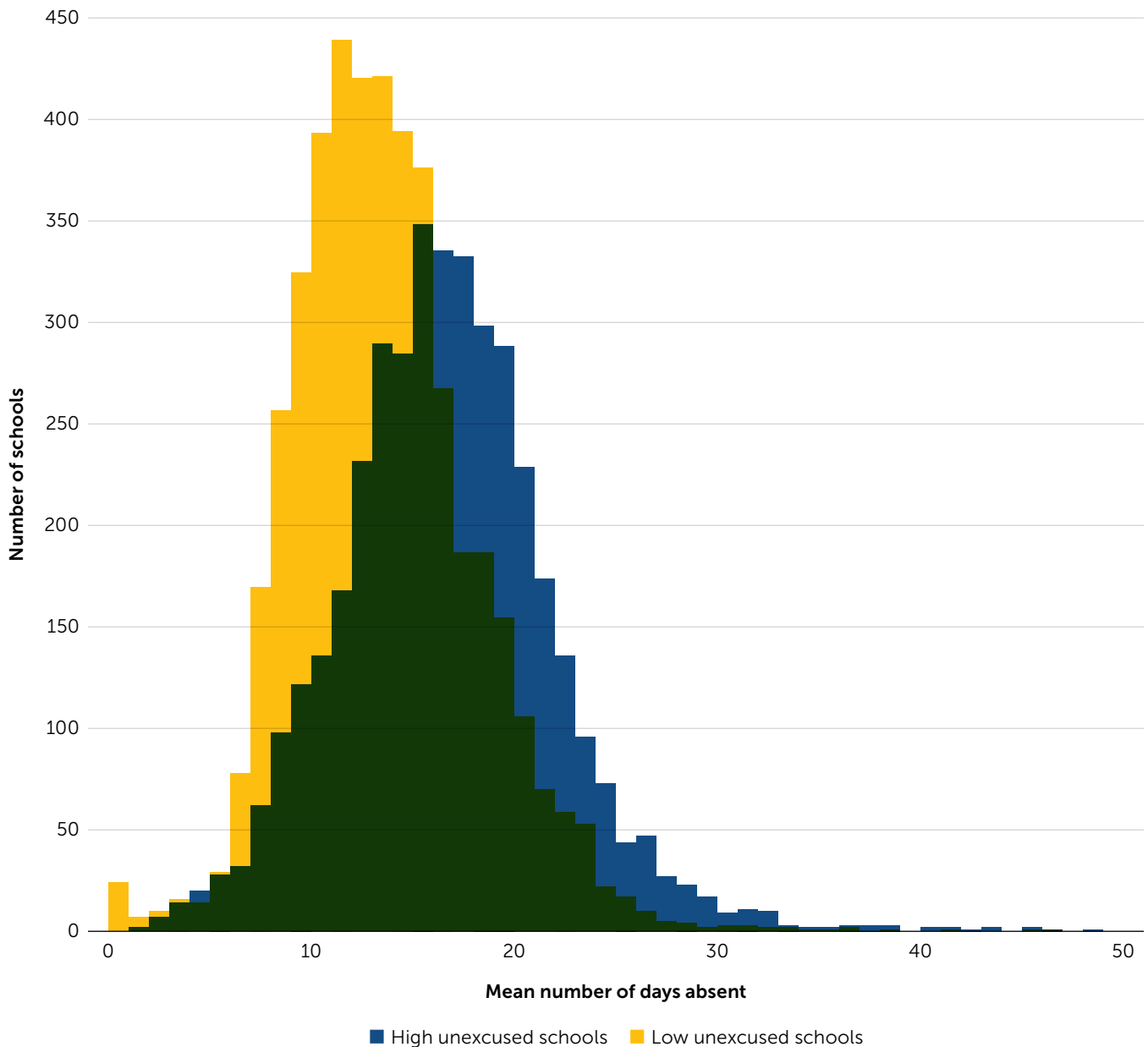
### Can Schools That Label Relatively Few Absences Unexcused Achieve High Attendance Rates?

Given that labeling absences as unexcused was adopted to improve attendance, it is important to examine whether greater proportions of unexcused absences are associated with higher attendance. To look at this relationship, we compared how attendance rates differed between schools that labeled a higher-than-average percentage of student absences unexcused (greater than 33.8 percent) and those that labeled a lower-than-average percentage of absences unexcused (less than or equal to 33.8 percent).<sup>18</sup> For this analysis, we used downloadable data files from DataQuest providing school-level rates of unexcused absences and attendance rates for the 2021–22 school year.

Figure 3 shows that during 2021–22 there was wide variability in the average number of days that students missed in both groups of schools, but schools that used the unexcused-absence label more sparingly had, on average, lower absenteeism rates. Students in those schools missed 13.7 school days on average. In contrast, schools that frequently labeled absences as unexcused, which typically leads to more punitive responses, tended to have higher absenteeism. Students in those schools missed 16.8 days on average. This pattern was similar in prior years.

<sup>18</sup> This mean represents the average school-level mean for the percentage of absences labeled unexcused. For this reason it differs from the mean percentage of absences that were unexcused statewide (see Figure 1).

**Figure 3.** Mean number of days students were absent in regular (nonalternative) K–12 schools that labeled a higher-than-average percentage of absences unexcused ( $n = 4,154$ ) versus schools that labeled a lower-than-average percentage of absences unexcused ( $n = 4,702$ ), 2021–22



Not only was the mean number of absences lower in schools that used the unexcused-absence label less frequently (13.7 vs. 16.8 days), but rates of chronic absence were also lower (27.7 percent vs. 37.5 percent). This finding helps to allay concerns that adopting practices to reduce the use of the unexcused-absence label would cause absenteeism to spike among students.

## Are Some Groups of Students More Likely to Have Their Absences Labeled Unexcused?

We examined disparities in the labeling of unexcused absences across four categories: socioeconomic disadvantage, race and ethnicity, disability status, and English learner status. Table 1 presents the definitions used by the CDE for each of these groups. Students in each of these groups experience higher levels of absenteeism compared to their peers.

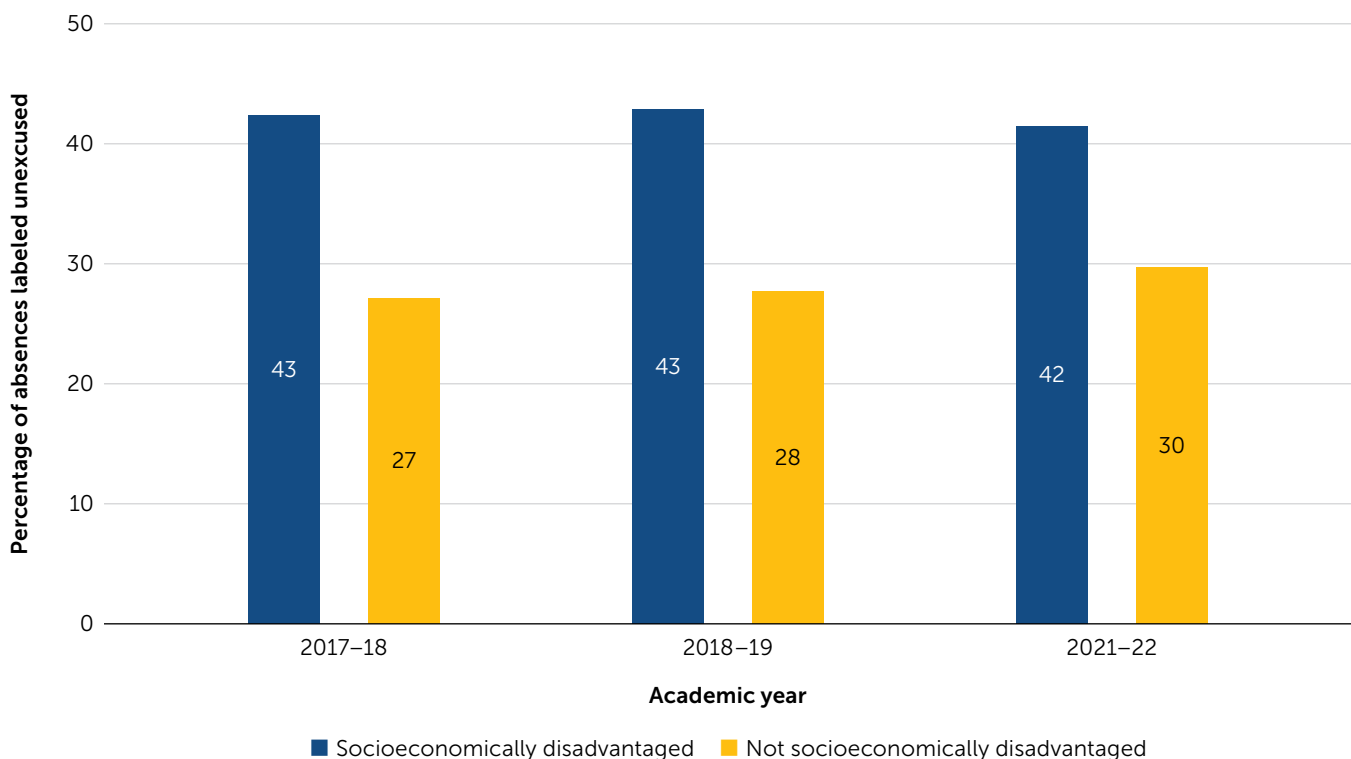
**Table 1.** Definitions used to examine disparities in labeling absences as unexcused

Category	Definition
<b>Socioeconomic disadvantage</b>	<p>Students meet at least one of the following criteria (California Longitudinal Pupil Achievement Data System, n.d.):</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Neither of the student’s parents has received a high school diploma.</li> <li>• The student is eligible for or participating in the free or reduced-price meal program.</li> <li>• The student is eligible for or participating in the Title I, Part C, Migrant Education Program.</li> <li>• The student is considered homeless.</li> <li>• The student is eligible for the foster program or as tribal foster youth.</li> <li>• The student is directly certified as socioeconomically disadvantaged.</li> <li>• The student is enrolled in a juvenile court school.</li> </ul>
<b>Race and ethnicity</b>	<p>Following federal requirements, two questions are used to collect self-reported data on ethnicity and race (California Department of Education, 2022a). The first question asks respondents about whether they identify as Hispanic or Latino. The second question asks respondents to select one or more races from the following categories: American Indian or Alaska Native, Asian, Black or African American, Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander, and White. In addition, California law requires the detailed collection of Asian and Pacific Islander subpopulations.<sup>19</sup> Respondents may report multiple races. Students of all races are categorized as Hispanic or Latino if they self-report as Hispanic on the first question.</p>
<b>English learner</b>	<p>A student for whom there is a report of a language other than English on the Home Language Survey (HLS) and who, upon initial assessment using the English Language Proficiency Assessments for California (ELPCA) and from additional information when appropriate, is determined to lack the clearly defined English language skills of listening, speaking, reading, and/or writing necessary to succeed in the school’s regular instructional programs (California Department of Education Data Reporting Office, n.d.).</p>
<b>Disability</b>	<p>A student who has an Individualized Education Plan for any of the following disabilities: intellectual, hard of hearing, deafness/hearing impairment, speech or language impairment, emotional disturbance, orthopedic impairment, other health impairment, established medical disability, specific learning disability, deaf-blindness, multiple disabilities, autism, or traumatic brain injury (California Department of Education, n.d.-a).</p>

<sup>19</sup> See Calif. Government Code § 8310.5.

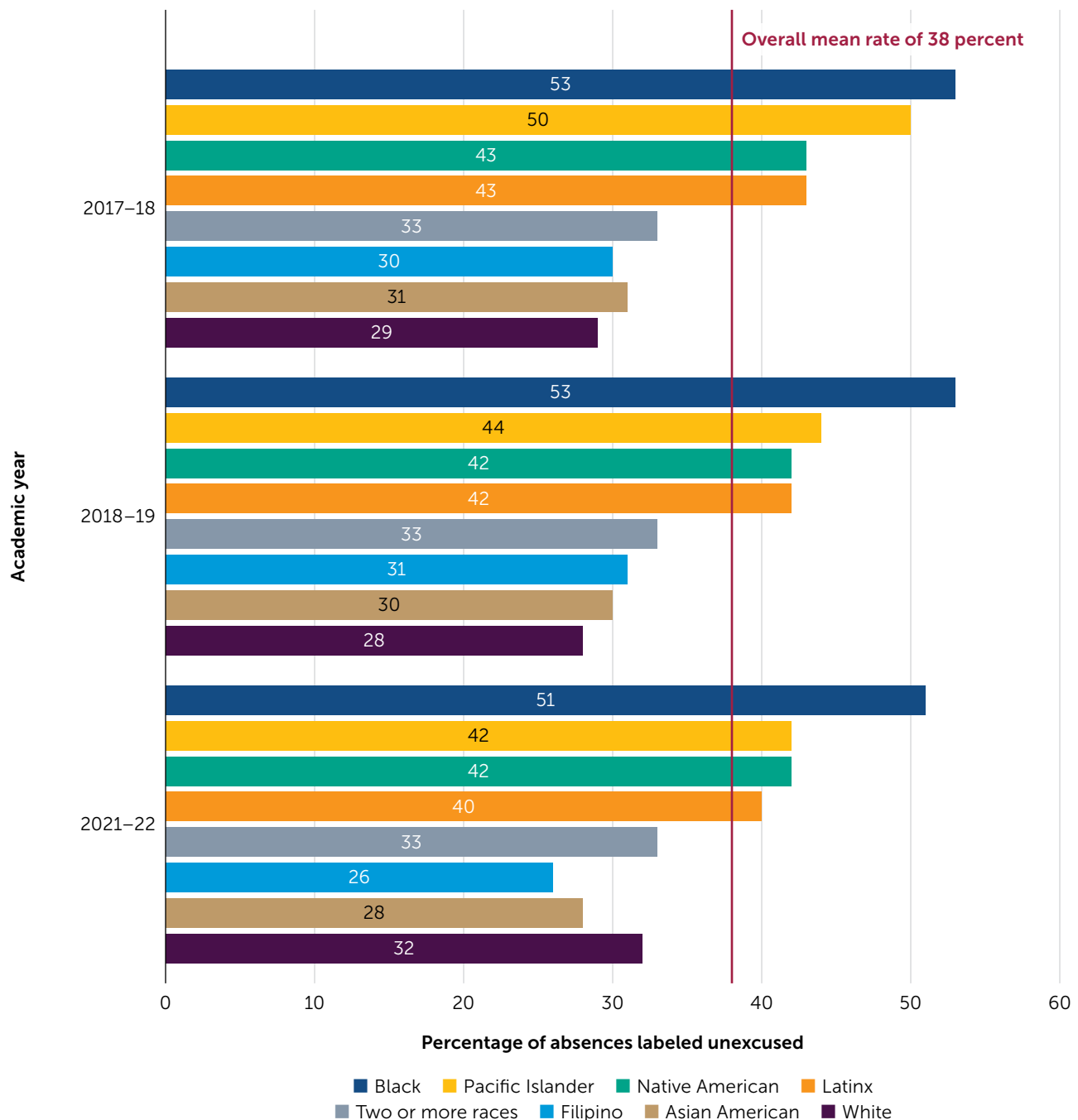
**Socioeconomic disparities.** Students from socioeconomically disadvantaged families were more likely than other students to have their absences labeled unexcused (Figure 4). In 2017–18 and 2018–19, approximately 43 percent of socioeconomically disadvantaged students had their absences labeled unexcused, compared to 27 percent who did not experience disadvantage. This disparity narrowed slightly in 2021–22.

**Figure 4.** Percentage of student absences labeled unexcused in regular (nonalternative) K–12 schools by year and student socioeconomic disadvantage



**Racial and ethnic disparities.** We compared the proportion of excused versus unexcused absences for eight racial/ethnic groups (Figure 5). Black students were substantially more likely than all other racial and ethnic groups to have their absences labeled unexcused. In all 3 years, more than half of Black students' absences were unexcused. The absences for Native American, Pacific Islander, and Latinx students were also disproportionately labeled unexcused.

**Figure 5.** Percentage of student absences labeled unexcused in regular (nonalternative) K–12 schools by year and by student race and ethnicity

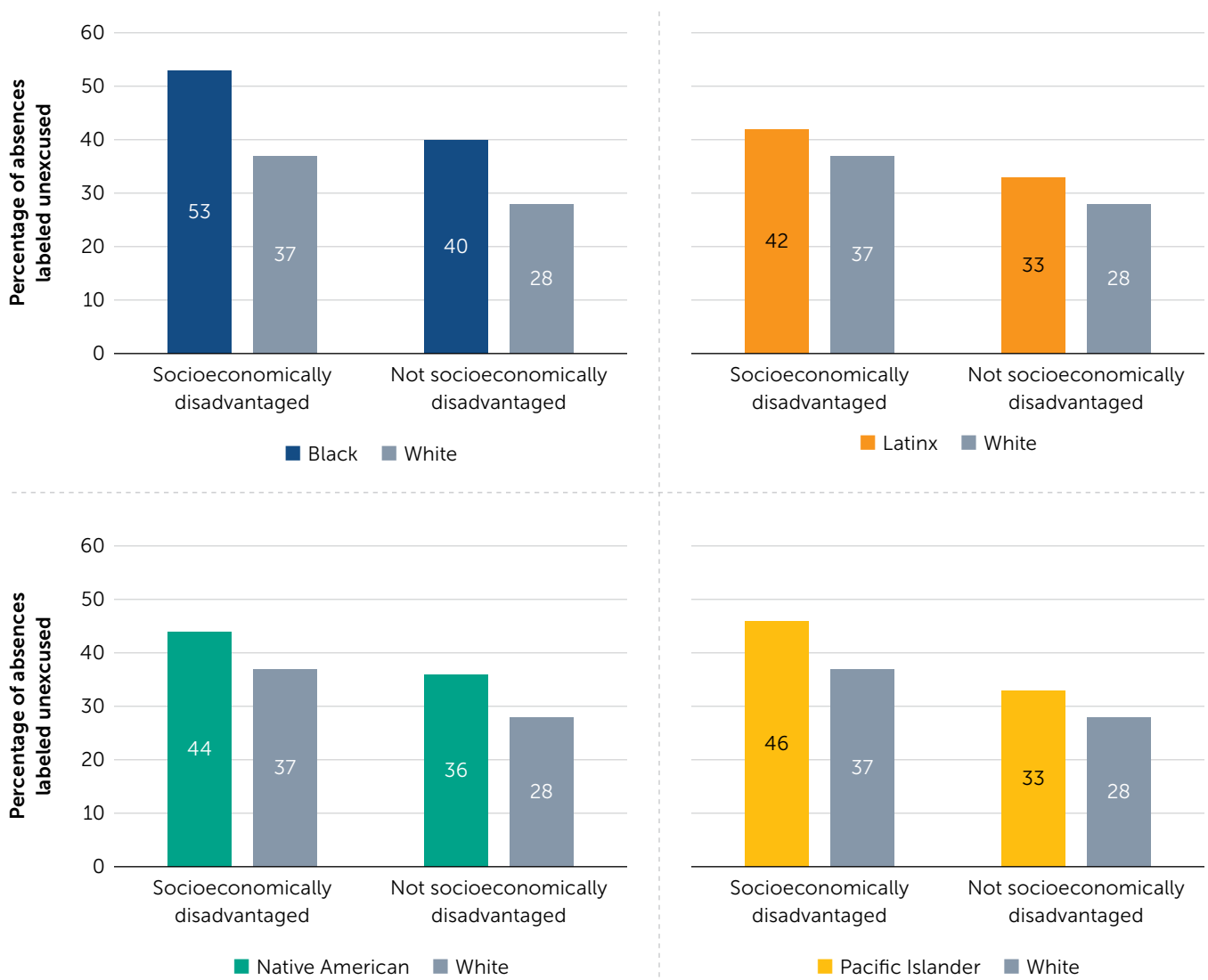


In 2017–18 and 2018–19, White students were least likely to have their absences labeled unexcused (28–29 percent). This pattern shifted in 2021–22, when schools labeled more White students’ absences unexcused (32 percent) and fewer Filipino and Asian American students’ absences unexcused (26 percent and 28 percent, respectively) relative to prior years.



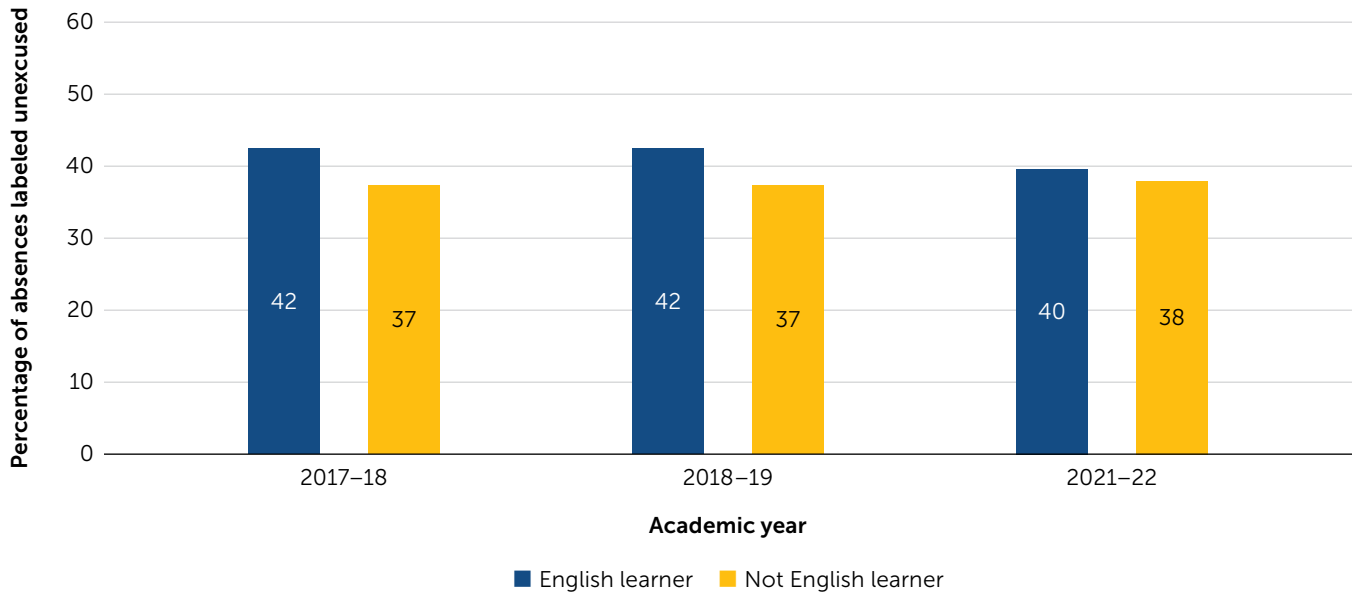
Although students of color were more likely to live in socioeconomically disadvantaged families, socioeconomic disadvantage did not fully account for the racial and ethnic disparities in labeling absences unexcused. If racial and ethnic disparities were due to socioeconomic conditions, we would expect to see similar unexcused absenteeism rates across racial and ethnic groups within each level of socioeconomic disadvantage. For example, Black and White students who were socioeconomically disadvantaged would have similar proportions of unexcused absences. However, Figure 6 shows that large disparities in unexcused absenteeism persisted within each socioeconomic stratum in the 2021–22 school year for Black, Pacific Islander, Native American, and Latinx students compared to White students. These findings raise the question of whether racial and ethnic bias is a factor in labeling absences unexcused since racial and ethnic disparities in labeling absences cannot solely be explained by socioeconomic disadvantage.

**Figure 6.** Racial and ethnic disparities in the percentage of absences labeled unexcused between students who are socioeconomically disadvantaged and those who are not, 2021–22

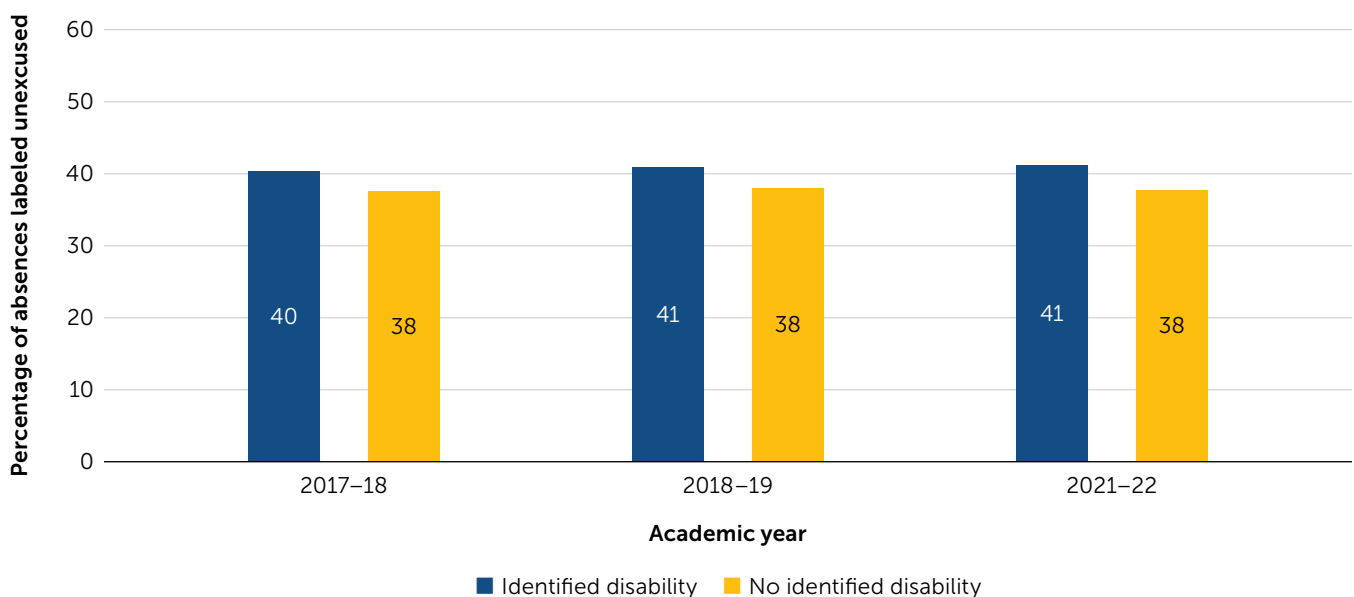


**Disparities by English learner and disability status.** Disparities in labeling absences unexcused based on English learner and disability status were much smaller than disparities by socioeconomic disadvantage or race and ethnicity (Figures 7 and 8).

**Figure 7.** Percentage of unexcused student absences in regular (nonalternative) K–12 schools by English learner status



**Figure 8.** Percentage of unexcused student absences in regular (nonalternative) K–12 schools by year and disability status



These smaller disparities relative to the racial and ethnic disparities are notable and raise these questions:

- Are schools better equipped (e.g., via staff training or staffing patterns) to understand these students' situations and therefore less likely to label their absences unexcused?
- Are there specific strategies and policies that promote communication with families of English learners and students with disabilities that lead to better understanding of why these students are absent?

### **Do Schools Serving More Socioeconomically Disadvantaged Students Adopt and Communicate More Punitive Attendance Policies?**

Reducing punitive responses to absenteeism will require specific attention to the students disproportionately affected: socioeconomically disadvantaged students and students of color. These students tend to be concentrated in high-poverty, racially segregated schools, which designate much higher percentages of absences as unexcused compared to other schools. In schools in which more than 90 percent of students were socioeconomically disadvantaged in 2021–22 ( $n = 1,720$ ), nearly half of all student absences (46.3 percent) were labeled unexcused. In contrast, in schools in which fewer than 50 percent of students were socioeconomically disadvantaged ( $n = 2,748$ ), 28.9 percent of absences were labeled unexcused. These differential labeling practices may be exposing students and families from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds to more punitive responses.

To understand the policies and practices that might explain these different proportions of unexcused absences, we reviewed school handbooks as well as school and district websites of 40 randomly selected middle and high schools in California. We randomly selected 20 schools from the pool of schools where more than 90 percent of students were socioeconomically disadvantaged and another 20 where less than half of students were socioeconomically disadvantaged. Because of patterns of residential segregation, less than 5 percent of students in the socioeconomically disadvantaged schools were White. In contrast, more than 40 percent of students in the more affluent schools identified as White.

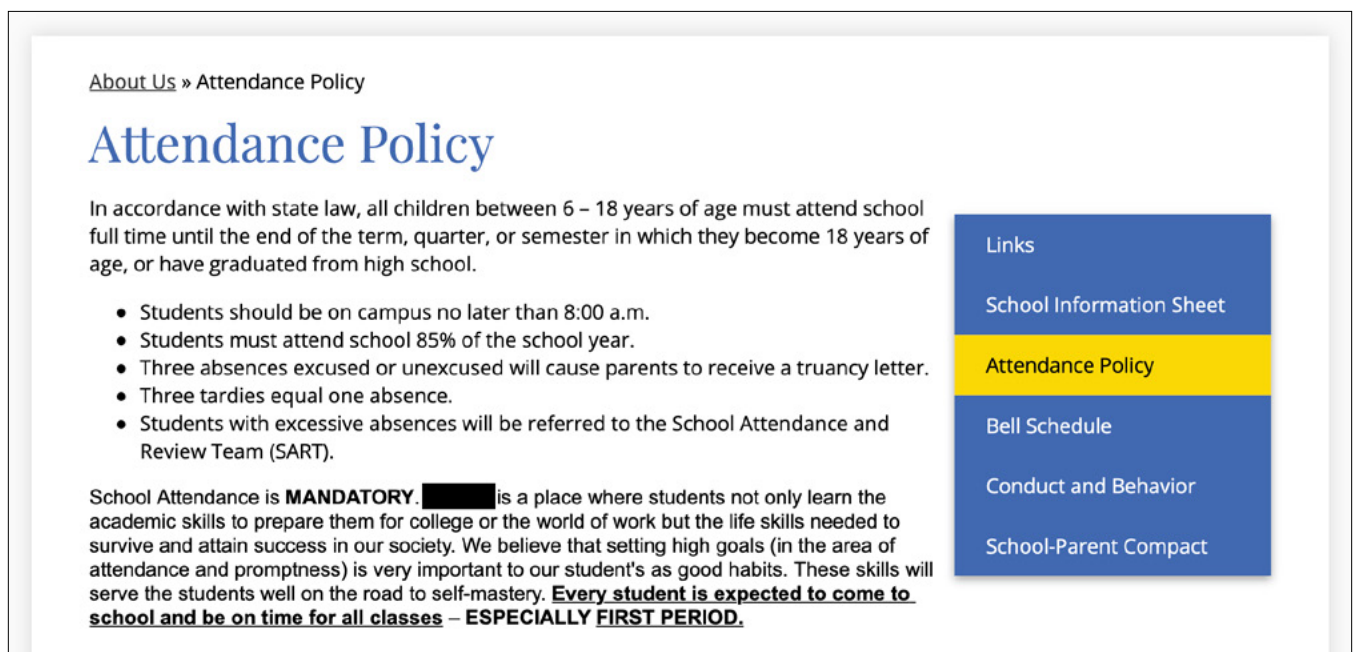
We found that the websites and student handbooks of the high-poverty, racially segregated schools communicated more punitive policies than the websites and handbooks of the more affluent schools. Fourteen out of 20 (70 percent) of the most socioeconomically disadvantaged schools communicated policies that multiple unexcused absences could result in mandated court appearances, compared to nine out of 20 (45 percent) of the more affluent schools. Similarly, the socioeconomically disadvantaged schools were more likely to publish policies stating that truancy would result in suspension of driver's licenses, loss of school privileges like extracurricular participation, and Saturday school or in-school detention.

Strikingly, the attendance policies in several school handbooks were no longer consistent with California state law. Several schools had policies indicating that students would be suspended for truancy even though the Education Code specifies that alternatives to suspension should be found. Out of the 40 schools, only one had a written policy stating that staff had the discretion to label absences excused or unexcused. This policy was enacted by the California legislature in 2013.

We also noted that several schools simply did not communicate policies to parents in an easily accessible format. In seven of the 40 schools sampled, policies regarding unexcused absences were available only on dense websites consisting of pages and pages of all the California Education Codes that applied to the district. They were not available on school websites and or in student handbooks.

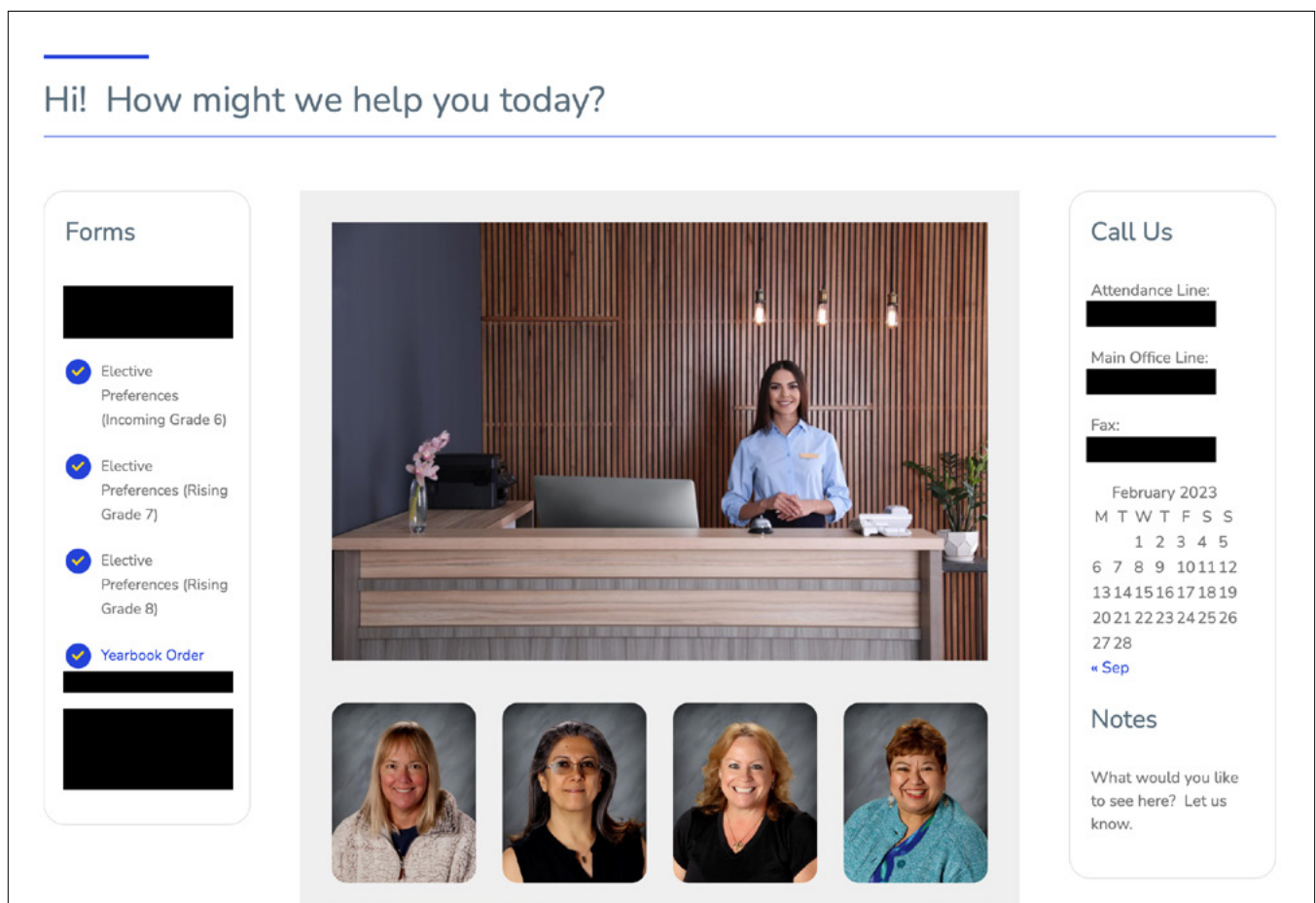
Schools from the two socioeconomic groups differed in their communication strategies with families. Socioeconomically disadvantaged schools tended to focus on communicating attendance rules and consequences for not following the rules. A typical example of this communication strategy is shown in Figure 9. This school’s attendance web page uses a threatening tone and focuses on legal requirements and mandates.

**Figure 9.** Web page providing attendance information for families from a school with more than 90 percent of students from socioeconomically disadvantaged families



In stark contrast, schools with few socioeconomically disadvantaged students tended to adopt communication styles treating parents as partners in promoting attendance and even as valued clients. An example of this communication strategy is shown in Figure 10. This school’s attendance web page adopts the position of a concierge (quite literally, showing the photo of a hotel concierge desk) inviting families, the school’s customers, to contact the school for service. The attendance clerks are presented as smiling service agents waiting to be called upon.

**Figure 10.** Web page providing attendance information for families from a school with less than 50 percent of students from socioeconomically disadvantaged families



Clearly, more research is needed to understand why this situation exists. It likely reflects a complex mix of challenges and circumstances. Understanding the factors that contribute to communicating strictly punitive approaches will be essential to helping change such approaches.

## Are There “Bright Spot” Schools That Have Fewer Disparities and Higher Attendance?

*Bright spots* are schools that data suggest are engaged in more equitable practices. Knowing these schools exist demonstrates that it is possible to equitably and nonpunitively achieve high attendance.

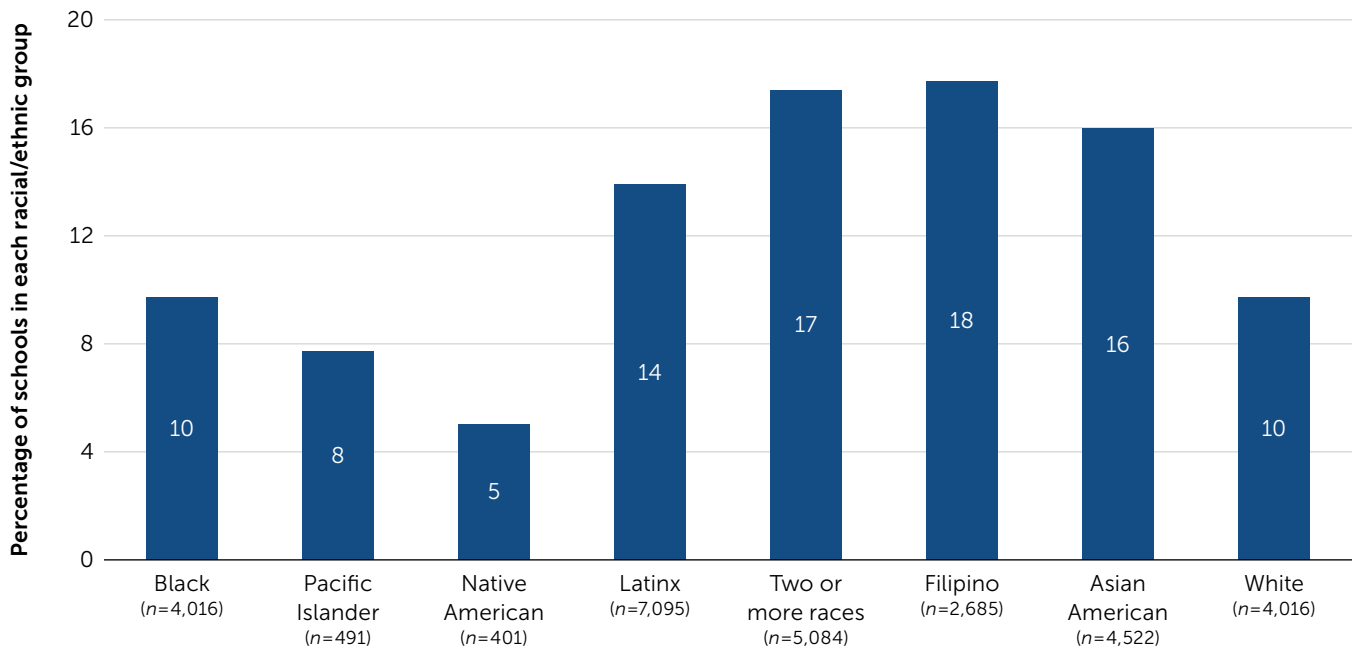
Using quantitative methods, we identified schools that are bright spots for each racial and ethnic group for the 2021–22 school year. We defined bright spots as schools that meet three criteria: (a) above-average levels of attendance (defined as fewer than 11.7 days absent); (b) below-average levels of unexcused absences (below 33.8 percent); and (c) a disparity between the racial or ethnic comparison group and White students that is smaller than two tenths of a standard deviation, which is the customary rule of thumb for a negligible effect size. To identify bright spots for White students, we chose Black students as the comparison group, resulting in the same schools being identified as bright spots for both Black and White students. We include bright spots for all ethnic groups, including White students, because we believe all students benefit from being in schools with more equitable attendance practices and better attendance.

To be eligible to be considered a bright spot for a racial or ethnic group, schools had to have an enrollment of at least 100 students, including at least ten White students and at least ten students of the racial or ethnic group under consideration. In addition, each group had to accrue at least ten absences total. These eligibility criteria were necessary to assure stable estimates. The small number of schools eligible to be bright spots for Native American and Pacific Islander students reflects the fact that most California schools serve few students from these groups.

The same school could be a bright spot for one ethnic or racial group but not another because either the school did not meet eligibility criteria for both groups or disparities in the labeling of unexcused absences were greater for one group than the other relative to White students.

Given the criteria we used to identify bright spots, only a small proportion of schools could be bright spots. Figure 11 shows that even given our relatively strict criteria, many schools qualified as bright spots in 2021–22.

**Figure 11.** The percentage of schools in 2021–22 considered bright spots for each racial and ethnic group



*Note.* The total number of schools eligible to be a bright spot for each racial/ethnic category is indicated beneath the category's name. The number on each bar represents the percentage of eligible schools (those serving at least 10 students of that racial or ethnic group and 10 White students) that qualify as bright spots.

Not surprisingly, more schools were bright spots for Filipino and Asian American students as well as for students identifying as two or more races. These groups had the smallest disparities in labeling absences as unexcused compared to White students (see Figure 5). A much smaller proportion of schools qualified as bright spots for Black, Pacific Islander, and Native American students.

Identifying bright spot schools quantitatively is just a starting point, and further research will be needed to validate the data and unpack the practices that are making a difference.

## Summary of Findings

During the 3 school years of this study (2017–18, 2018–19, and 2021–22), the statewide percentage of absences labeled unexcused has held constant at around 38 percent, yet the percentage of unexcused absences varies significantly by school, with some using the unexcused-absence label much more frequently than others. Schools with higher percentages of unexcused absences typically had lower attendance rates while schools with lower percentages of unexcused absences typically had higher levels of attendance.



Students who are socioeconomically disadvantaged are more likely to have their absences labeled unexcused. This is also true for Black, Native American, Latinx, and Pacific Islander students relative to White, Asian American, and Filipino students, with Black students experiencing the largest disparity. These racial and ethnic disparities could not be fully explained by poverty since they remained across differences in socioeconomic status. Interestingly, although English learners and students with disabilities were more likely to be chronically absent, disparities in unexcused absences for these groups were relatively small compared to disparities across racial and ethnic groups.

Preliminary data suggest that schools that serve more socioeconomically disadvantaged students communicate more punitive approaches. More research is needed to understand why. The good news is there are some schools that are bright spots, with high attendance rates, less frequent use of the unexcused-absence label, and fewer disparities in labeling absences as unexcused.

## Recommendations for Action

In California, districts and schools can use data on excused and unexcused absences to enrich their continuous improvement strategies aimed at bettering student outcomes and reducing education inequities. We make the following recommendations:

- Use data to learn about disparities and identify bright spots.
- Invest in better practices and data systems for monitoring and understanding reasons for both excused and unexcused absences.
- Review and update local and state policies related to unexcused absences.
- Assess and improve how attendance practices and policies are communicated to students and families.
- Invest in professional development to improve attendance and truancy practices.

### Use Data to Learn About Disparities

Schools, districts, and community stakeholders can and should use data to find out if absences for socioeconomically disadvantaged students or students from specific racial and ethnic groups are more likely to be labeled unexcused. If you are in a district, you can look at your own data on California's portal. The data can be used to examine disparities by socioeconomic disadvantage, racial and ethnic group, and English learner and disability status. You can examine whether disparities exist only in a particular school or if they are districtwide, which would suggest they are related to a district policy rather than an individual school's practice.

You can also review data over multiple years to see whether the patterns are persistent, and these patterns can help to illuminate new policy and practice directions. Keep in mind that the DataQuest data provide more detail and a broader range of grade levels than the chronic-absence data on the California School Dashboard.

These data can also be leveraged to identify schools that are bright spots and student groups (e.g., special education and English learners) that do not experience disproportionality in the labeling of absences as unexcused. After identifying these schools or student groups, ask about the schools' practices affecting attendance, engagement, and learning, and compare their practices with those of schools experiencing problematic truancy patterns. For example, are administrators in particular schools achieving more equitable outcomes because they are more effective at using the 2013 California policy giving them greater discretion to label absences as excused? Once effective practices have been identified, assess whether and how they could be spread to other schools or districts. Researchers as well as districts or County Offices of Education (COEs) could combine quantitative and qualitative research strategies to assess the effectiveness of these practices.

In sum, examining the practices of schools with more equitable unexcused absences could yield important insights into how to counter current disparities. These insights can be applied to promote more equitable outcomes.

### **Invest in Better Practices and Data Systems**

The key to improving attendance is understanding and addressing the underlying challenges that lead students to miss too much school in the first place. Schools and districts can better monitor reasons for absences over time so that they can detect when large numbers of students face similar challenges and tailor attendance strategies to specific reasons for absence.

In the long term, local education agencies with the support of the CDE can develop a more consistent approach to tracking reasons for absences beyond the labels of excused, unexcused, unverified, and suspension that is implemented systemwide. The CDE could partner with COEs and school districts to develop guidance on a common approach to identifying underlying causes (e.g., lack of transportation, bullying, academic challenges, mental and physical health, mobility, etc.) as well as protocols and training for coding absences. This would enable monitoring for common challenges facing a region or even the entire state. It is possible that some districts have developed approaches to capturing information about reasons for absence that could inform a statewide approach.

Once available, statewide and regional data on specific reasons for absence can inform planning and development of interventions across divisions within school districts as well as the support offered by community partners. California policymakers can also use this information

to update and expand the reasons for legitimately excusing absences as needed to reflect the realities that students face. Recent legislation adding mental health absences is such an example, and other reasons are likely to emerge over time.

In the short term, districts and schools can combine quantitative data on patterns of absenteeism and truancy with qualitative strategies to deepen understanding of the conditions affecting attendance for specific schools, grades, or student groups. School communities can use focus groups, surveys, staff observations, case management notes, and other sources to identify common barriers to attendance as well as what helps students and families attend school. Such data can inform how school staff and their partners develop and strengthen their tiered attendance approaches and their school improvement plans.

### **Update Policies Related to Unexcused Absences**

Invest time in reviewing district policies related to designating and responding to unexcused absences. Given all the recent changes, written and publicly shared policies may not reflect updates in attendance policy or what is now known about effective practices. A review of current policies suggests that many do not reflect the need to offer alternatives to suspension or state law allowing for staff discretion around labeling absences as unexcused. Policies also may not capture the addition of new valid excuses for missing school.

One area that deserves particularly careful examination is policies and practices related to in-class assignments, homework, and exams missed due to absence. State law currently does not require teachers to support students if absences are unexcused, and this matter is left to local discretion. If the goal is to promote learning and engagement, then schools and districts should consider how best to allow students with unexcused absences to submit and get feedback on makeup work (e.g., submit late homework, take tests missed while absent, etc.) so that they are given the opportunity to stay on track with learning or course credits. We recognize that doing this well will require striking a balance between equity and personal responsibility.

### **Improve Communication About Attendance Policies and Practices**

How information about unexcused absences and their consequences is communicated to students and families can have a tremendous impact on whether students and families feel they can openly discuss the barriers they face to getting to school. Both the tone and clarity of the language used in handbooks, websites, and letters are extremely important.

Review the attendance information on your school and district websites, in truancy letters sent to parents and guardians, and in instruction manuals and training for office staff who monitor attendance. Is the tone of these communications one of adherence and threat of punitive action for nonadherence? Or does the tone convey that school staff are willing to work with parents, guardians, and students to maximize attendance and properly excuse absences?

As part of such an assessment, it is important to take stock of whether students and families are equipped with information about how to ensure that absences are labeled appropriately to prevent punitive action. If such guidance does not exist, work with student groups, parent organizations, and community groups to develop effective communications that can be incorporated into websites, district handbooks, and truancy letters sent to families.

### **Invest in Professional Development to Improve Practices**

Draw on knowledge gained from reviewing data, policies, and communications to put in place professional development that helps district and school staff implement equitable attendance practices. Such professional development aligns with California’s laws that hold districts and schools accountable for reducing absenteeism and require the appointment and training of supervisors of attendance charged with attendance improvement. In 2018, California amended its laws to require district or COE supervisors of attendance to take a data-informed approach to reducing truancy and chronic absence.<sup>20</sup> These policies create the opportunities to build capacity, especially through COEs, to take a comprehensive, prevention-oriented, and tiered approach (Attendance Works, 2022b) to truancy prevention.

Such professional development can also equip supervisors of attendance as well as school administrators and staff to use their discretion appropriately, including monitoring so that staff can notice if certain populations of students continue to have disproportionately high levels of unexcused absences and address the issue. Key strategies include helping staff find out about the perspectives of students and families and gathering quantitative and qualitative data about what motivates and helps attendance as well what barriers keep students from showing up to school.

## **Conclusion**

Schools, by law, have discretion over whether absences are labeled unexcused. Schools also have substantial discretion in how they respond to unexcused absences. We hope the recommendations in this report will help school leaders identify socioeconomic, racial, and ethnic disparities in the labeling of absences as unexcused; identify the causes of these disparities; and begin to put into place more equitable and effective practices to promote good attendance.

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<sup>20</sup> See California Compulsory Education Law, Calif. Education Code § 48240.

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## Appendix A: Methods

### Quantitative Data and Analysis

To conduct the quantitative analyses presented in this report, we used DataQuest, an online system maintained by the California Department of Education ([dq.cde.ca.gov/dataquest](http://dq.cde.ca.gov/dataquest)).

We used CDE data on reasons for absence from three school years: 2017–18, 2018–19, and 2021–22. We excluded the two school years when most schools used hybrid or virtual education during at least part of the year (2019–20 and 2020–21).

The data presented in Figures 1, 2, and 4–8 were obtained from the online DataQuest feature that allows users to create reports. We graphed findings from state-level reports for the relevant subgroups for all regular (nonalternative) schools. Statistical tests were not necessary for making between-group comparisons because the data are provided for the full population, not a sample of the population.

The data presented in Figures 3 and 11 come from the data files on reasons for absence and chronic absence for the 2021–22 school year available through DataQuest.<sup>21</sup> These data files contain school-level data (vs. student-level data). To select regular (nonalternative) charter and public schools for the analysis, we merged the Reason Absent data file with the downloadable file containing school characteristics<sup>22</sup> and excluded all schools that were not regular schools (i.e., schools with school ownership codes other than 60–67). We also examined the webpages of outlier schools that had extremely high or low levels of either absenteeism or unexcused absenteeism and excluded the outlier schools that were designed to support home schooling or were primarily virtual. Finally, we limited the analysis to schools with at least 100 students to assure stable estimates of absenteeism rates.

In the analysis to determine bright spots (Figure 11), we excluded schools that did not have at least ten students in each demographic group and that had fewer than ten total absences reported for each group. For example, the group of schools eligible to be a bright spot for Black students included all regular schools with more than 100 students that served at least ten Black students who together had at least ten absences over the course of the school year and at least ten White students who also together accrued at least ten absences. This assured that extreme scores did not skew the overall findings. We also verified that the findings presented, which were based on school means for ease of interpretation, were consistent with findings based on school medians. All analyses were conducted using Stata version 16.0.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Absenteeism by reason data can be downloaded from [cde.ca.gov/ds/ad/filesabr.asp](http://cde.ca.gov/ds/ad/filesabr.asp).

<sup>22</sup> Public schools and districts data files can be downloaded from [cde.ca.gov/ds/si/ds/pubschls.asp](http://cde.ca.gov/ds/si/ds/pubschls.asp).

<sup>23</sup> StataCorp. (2019). Stata Statistical Software: Release 16.



The findings presented in Figures 9 and 10 are based on a content analysis of school and district documents for 40 randomly selected middle and high schools. The downloadable DataQuest files were used to identify strata of schools based on the percentage of students who were socioeconomically disadvantaged. The most impoverished stratum contained schools in which greater than 90 percent of the students were socioeconomically disadvantaged and fewer than 5 percent were White ( $n = 1,720$ ). The most advantaged stratum contained schools in which fewer than 50 percent of students were socioeconomically disadvantaged ( $n = 2,748$ ). From each of these two strata, we randomly sampled 20 middle and high schools.

For each of the 40 schools, we uploaded to NVivo version 12.0<sup>24</sup> all school and district documents related to attendance policies. These included webpages and handbooks designed specifically for families as well as densely written district policies that in some cases described attendance policies only by referring to California state statutes. Three coders separately searched for and downloaded all attendance-related documents for five schools and coded all stated consequences for unexcused absences, making the codes as specific as possible. These codes were condensed during several interpretive meetings to form a smaller set of mutually exclusive consequences for unexcused absenteeism. We found low reliability across coders in the coding of policies due to the dense and complex nature of the policy documents. Therefore, two coders separately coded all policies for all 40 schools and compared results to assure that no policies were missed. The third coder reviewed the documents and the coding of five of these double-coded schools and found that the double coding produced trustworthy findings.

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<sup>24</sup> QSR International Pty Ltd. (2020). NVivo (March 2020 release). [qsrinternational.com/nvivo-qualitative-data-analysis-software/home](https://qsrinternational.com/nvivo-qualitative-data-analysis-software/home)

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## Author Biographies

**Clea McNeely** is a research professor in the College of Nursing at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. She studies how schools can equitably promote the health and wellbeing of adolescents. Her research on absenteeism has been funded by the National Institute of Justice and the Spencer Foundation.

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