

Health Wellness & Nutrition: **BACK TO SCHOOL**

A Look at Chronic Absenteeism Across America

Government data shows the problem of students habitually missing school varies from state to state, with about one-third of students in the nation's capital absent 15 days or more in a single school year

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Associated Press

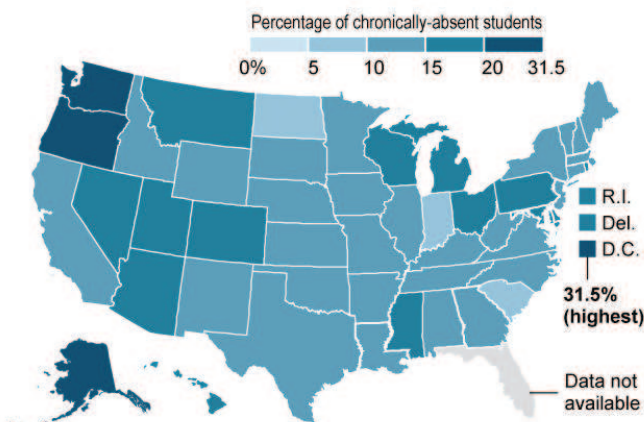
WASHINGTON — The problem of students habitually missing school varies widely from state to state, with about one-third of students in the nation's capital absent 15 days or more in a single school year, according to an Associated Press analysis of government statistics.

Overall, the national average of chronic absenteeism was 13 percent, or about 6.5 million students, the Education Department said.

"Chronic absenteeism is a national problem," Secretary of Education John B. King Jr. said in a

Skipping school

A federal study finds that nearly 6.5 million students were chronically absent — out of school for at least three weeks — during the 2013-14 school year.



SOURCE: Department of Education

statement Wednesday. "Frequent absences from school can be devastating to a child's education."

The report was the first

release of chronic absentee figures from the department.

The Obama administration began a program last

fall that now works with states and local groups to identify mentors to help habitually absent kids get back on track. As part of the effort, the White House said Wednesday that a New York-based company, STATE Bags, was donating 30,000 backpacks to children being mentored in the program.

Of the 100 largest school districts by enrollment, Detroit had the highest rate of chronic absenteeism.

Nearly 58 percent of students were chronically absent in the 2013-2014 school year.

Washington state and Alaska had chronic absentee rates hovering

around one-quarter of students with that level of absences.

According to AP's analysis, girls were just as likely as boys to habitually miss school. Nearly 22 percent of all American Indian students were reported as regularly absent, followed by Native Hawaiians at 21 percent and black students at 17 percent. Hispanic and white students were close to the national average of 13 percent.

Students are regularly missing school for lots of reasons, Balfanz says. Many are poor and could be staying home to care for a sibling or helping with elder care. Others are avoiding school because they're being bullied or they worry it's not safe. And then, there are some students who simply skip school.

Schools should be creating welcoming environments to make students feel wanted each day, Balfanz says. They also need to build relationships with the kids who are regularly absent to figure out what's keeping them away, he said.

As part of its Civil Rights Data Collection, the department surveyed all public schools in the country, covering over 95,000 schools and 50 million students. Roughly one in seven of all K-12 public schools nation-

wide reported having not a single chronically absent student that year.

Chronic absenteeism is one of several topics covered in the data collection. It also looked at school discipline and high-rigor course offerings.

Other figures from the report:

- Black preschool children are 3.6 times as likely to get one or more out-of-school suspensions as their white counterparts.
- Black children represent 19 percent of preschoolers, yet they account for 47 percent of preschool kids getting suspended.
- White students make up 41 percent of preschoolers, and 28 percent of preschool kids with suspensions.
- Nationwide, almost half of high schools offered classes in calculus, and more than three-quarters offered Algebra II.
- 33 percent of high schools with substantial black and Latino enrollment offered calculus. That compares to 56 percent of high schools with low numbers of black and Latino children that offered calculus. Similar gaps were seen for physics, chemistry and Algebra II.

21st International AIDS Conference Commences on "Mandela Day"

Linda Villarosa
BAI Contributing Writer

It was entirely fitting that the 21st International AIDS Conference kicked off on July 17 in Durban, South Africa, on "Mandela Day," a global celebration of the great man's birthday.

In Durban's cavernous International Convention Centre, Makgatho's son, Ndaba, joined his cousin Kweku, and the two spoke movingly of their grandfather's work and legacy.

"Sixteen years ago my grandfather arrived on this stage at the tipping point," said Kweku Mandela. "Madiba asked us to do something about HIV/AIDS treatment. I'm humbled to stand before you continuing my grandfather's legacy in my small way," he said, using the isiXhosa term of endearment Madiba, or father, that many South Africans use when speaking of the senior Mandela.

International superstars Queen Latifah and Common provided an unofficial kick-off to AIDS 2016 on Saturday with a concert urging the world to "keep the promise and stop AIDS."

At a protest before the event, Latifah, who played an HIV positive mother in the 2007 HBO film "Life Support," marched alongside the mayor of Durban and the late Nkosi Johnson's adoptive mother.

And South African-born celebrity Charlize Theron made a dazzling appearance at Monday's opening ceremony. In language ripped from the social justice script, the Academy Award-winning actress and U.N. Messenger for Peace said:



A group of people walk past an AIDS memorial in Durban, South Africa.

"The real reason we haven't beaten this epidemic boils down to one simple fact: We value some lives more than others. We love men more than women. Straight love more than gay love. White skin more than Black skin. The rich more than the poor. Adults more than adolescents."

Still, some things remain the same. Largely because of stigma, the epidemic continues to harm those least able to beat it back:

poor communities of color and so-called key populations, including young women and girls, men who have sex with men, transgender individuals, sex workers, drug users.

"HIV incidence among adults is either stable or increasing," stated conference co-chair Chris Beyrer, M.D., who also pointed to measurable declines in global AIDS funding. "It is too soon to declare victory."

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