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The Post-Pandemic "Attendance Crisis" in Historical Perspective

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School attendance rates in the United States are lower now than prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. This rise in absenteeism has often been characterized as a crisis; but whether it amounts to a broader breakdown in norms depends on the historical baseline against which it is judged. The recent decline in attendance rates represents a small setback within a much longer trajectory of increasing school participation. This perspective helps distinguish a modest national shift in attendance from the deeper and more concentrated barriers to improving attendance that long predate the pandemic.

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Abstract: School attendance rates in the United States are lower now than prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. This rise in absenteeism has often been characterized as a crisis; but whether it amounts to a broader breakdown in norms depends on the historical baseline against which it is judged. The recent decline in attendance rates represents a small setback within a much longer trajectory of increasing school participation. This perspective helps distinguish a modest national shift in attendance from the deeper and more concentrated barriers to improving attendance that long predate the pandemic.

Keywords: student attendance, chronic absenteeism, COVID-19 pandemic, education policy

The Post-Pandemic "Attendance Crisis" in Historical Perspective

School attendance rates in the United States are lower now than prior to the COVID-19 pandemic. After a spike in absences, attendance has improved but has not recovered to its pre-pandemic level. The response has often been to characterize this change as an "attendance crisis." Recent accounts have asked whether school has become "optional" (MacGillis, 2024) and whether an acute crisis has hardened into a "chronic condition" (Malkus, 2026). These narratives suggest something more consequential than just an increase in absences: that families have come to value school less, that expectations for regular attendance have substantially eroded, or that schools no longer command the same place in families' daily lives. These descriptions are an attempt to wrestle with a real problem for educators and policymakers: students are missing more days of school, and in some communities the increase has been substantial. But whether these changes amount to a broader breakdown in norms depends on the historical baseline against which they are judged.

Much of the current discussion begins in the recent past, using 2018-19 attendance rates as the baseline. That is an understandable benchmark for measuring pandemic-related disruption, but a narrow one for judging the condition of American schooling. Regular attendance cannot be taken for granted. It is a major institutional accomplishment built over generations through the expansion of public education, compulsory-schooling laws, the decline of child labor, and the development of expectations and supports that made regular school participation possible (Goldin & Katz, 2003; Rauscher, 2014; Tyack & Berkowitz, 1977). Viewed within that longer history, the post-pandemic decline looks different: meaningful and worthy of attention, but considerably smaller than the rhetoric of collapsed norms and expectations might imply.

In this essay, I place contemporary attendance patterns in historical perspective by tracing changes in school attendance from the late nineteenth century through the present. Regular participation in schooling expanded dramatically over the twentieth century and continued to improve well within living memory. The recent decline therefore represents a small setback within a much longer trajectory of increasing school participation, rather than a return to an era in which regular attendance is not the norm. This perspective does not minimize the consequences of missed school or the severe attendance problems facing some communities. Instead, it helps distinguish a modest national shift in attendance from the deeper and more concentrated barriers that long predate the pandemic. That distinction is essential for describing the current problem accurately, and for designing responses that are both proportionate to its scale and targeted to where the greatest needs actually lie.

An Historical Perspective on School Attendance Rates

Figure 1 traces two measures of participation in American schooling from 1870 through 2024. The first is the average daily attendance rate among students enrolled in public schools: the percentage present on an average day. The second adjusts that rate by the estimated share of children ages 5-17 enrolled in a public, parochial, or other private school. Independent homeschooling is excluded from this measure, which captures participation in the regular school system rather than all educational activity. Because the historical sources are not fully comparable across eras, the figure is best read as a portrait of broad change, and not a precise record of school participation and daily attendance (Hutt, 2018). (See the Technical Appendix for a detailed discussion of data sources, methods, and limitations.)

[Figure 1 here]

Both the public school daily attendance rate and broader population-adjusted measure highlight the dramatic expansion and normalization of regular school participation in the United States. In the late nineteenth century, a large share of students were not present in school on a daily basis, if they were enrolled at all. For example, in 1889-90, less than 65% of enrolled public-school students attended school on an average day; and (as shown by the population-adjusted rate), public-school average daily attendance overstates regular participation in schooling, given the large share of students who were simply not enrolled at all. Over the following century, however, the United States accomplished a significant expansion in schooling and the normalization of regular school attendance. By 1959-60, the average daily attendance rate for public-school students reached about 90%. Progress continued over the late twentieth century (though the population-adjusted rate began to decline, due at least in part to rising homeschool rates). By the twenty-first century, average daily attendance for public-school students reached about 93%, or about 167 or 168 days during a now-typical 180-day school year.

This long rise in school attendance and enrollment helps put pandemic-era declines in attendance in perspective. Even within living memory, national attendance improved substantially: the average daily attendance rate rose by more than three percentage points between 1959-60 and 1989-90, equivalent to roughly six additional days in a 180-day school year. The institutional norm of regular attendance was still being strengthened well into the late twentieth century. The post-pandemic change is notable but historically modest against that trajectory. After a sharp decline during the COVID-19 pandemic, daily attendance rates recovered to around 92%. This means that in 2023-24, the average student missed about 2 additional days of school compared to the pre-pandemic period—perhaps a meaningful setback, but certainly not a drastic reshaping of school attendance norms.

If the total increase in student absences is relatively modest on average, and especially small with historical context, then why have these post-pandemic declines in attendance led to a "crisis" discourse? One reason is the prominence of a different attendance measure: chronic absenteeism. Chronic absenteeism is defined as missing 10% or more days of school (i.e., 18 days in a 180-day school year). This measure is prevalent because it was elevated by educational researchers and policymakers and formally embedded in most states' data tracking and school accountability policies (Jordan, 2017; Jordan & Miller, 2017). Chronic absenteeism can be valuable for identifying students who need support or communities with concentrated attendance issues, but it has limitations because it is a threshold measure. A student who moves from 17 to 18 absences in a 180-day year changes categories, while a student who moves from 30 to 40 absences does not. If many students are near the 10% cutoff, then a modest shift in average attendance can generate a large increase in the chronic absenteeism rate. A sharp and persistent increase in chronic absenteeism rates (Malkus, 2026) is therefore consistent with a small decline in average daily attendance (e.g., 2 additional absences in 2023-24). They describe the same distribution in different ways.

Claims of an attendance "crisis" also fit a longer pattern in American education discourse, in which real problems are translated into starker narratives of institutional failure. Evidence of genuine shortcomings can be generalized into claims that the entire public-school system is failing, obscuring both contrary evidence and the specific conditions producing the problem (Berliner & Biddle, 1995). Once established nationally, these failure narratives can also "echo" into coverage of states, districts, and individual schools, shaping how varied local conditions are interpreted and encouraging isolated or uneven problems to be understood as evidence of systemwide dysfunction (Hlavacik & Schneider, 2021). Such narratives have direct

consequences: by weakening public confidence, they can reduce political support, encourage enrollment and funding losses, and produce a cycle in which disinvestment weakens schools and then supplies further evidence for claims of failure (Jabbar & Espinoza, 2026). This does not mean that the attendance problem itself is manufactured. Rather, it means that the movement from a large increase in one threshold-based indicator (chronic absenteeism) to a broader "crisis" diagnosis deserves closer scrutiny.

Placing the recent decline within the longer history does not make school absences less consequential. Absences are associated with lower achievement and explain part of the lagging academic recovery from the pandemic (Swiderski et al., 2025; Yaow et al., 2026). National averages can also obscure severe attendance problems concentrated among particular students, schools, and communities (Lenhoff & Singer, 2025; Swiderski et al., 2026). But this historical context should at least temper the way that we describe this problem. The national trend looks less like the collapse of an attendance norm than a modest but meaningful setback within the long history of a remarkably successful expansion of participation in schooling.

Implications for Policy and Practice

Educators and policymakers are already increasing their focus on attendance: schools and districts are adopting new strategies (Singer et al., 2026), and states are offering new guidance and passing new attendance-related policies (Felton, 2026). The historical perspective presented here suggests that they should distinguish between two related but different problems. First, attendance has declined modestly nationwide since the pandemic, with substantially larger declines among some students, schools, and communities. Second, severe absenteeism remains concentrated in communities where barriers to regular attendance long predate the pandemic. These problems overlap, but they are not identical, and they call for different responses.

The modest national decline in attendance should be addressed proportionally. Missing two additional days per year (on average) is consequential, particularly when aggregated across millions of students. But it does not require acting as if the basic expectation of regular attendance has disappeared. National survey evidence points to changes in physical- and mental-health concerns, family routines, students' connection to school, and parents' judgments about when an absence is warranted (Rapaport et al., 2026). Sensible universal strategies include establishing clear expectations, making attendance information timely and understandable, communicating accurately about when illness requires staying home, highlighting school-based resources that are available to support student mental health, and rebuilding relationships and routines disrupted during the pandemic. Such efforts can reinforce attendance without relying on alarmist messaging or indiscriminate punitive approaches.

To the extent that states and districts need to target their response to pandemic-era changes, they can do so based on where attendance rates have declined the most. The modest national average conceals substantial variation: Some students and schools have returned close to their earlier attendance patterns, while others have experienced much larger and more persistent declines (Swiderski et al., 2025). To identify where pandemic-related declines were the greatest, educators and school leaders need to look beyond chronic absenteeism rates. States and districts can compare each school, grade, and student group with its own pre-pandemic attendance patterns. They can also examine the proportion of students at several points in the absence distribution, rather than relying exclusively on the chronic absence threshold. The purpose should be to identify where attendance changed most and for whom attendance rates have fallen the most. For students or communities with unusually large declines, further investigating the problem can help inform the solution, as different specific changes since the pandemic (e.g.,

disengagement from school, mental-health needs, changes in family routines or expectations) may require different approaches.

Second, the most sustained investments should remain focused on communities where absenteeism was already highest. The COVID-19 pandemic did not create the nation's deepest attendance problems. Severe levels of absenteeism were already concentrated in places where poverty, unstable housing, unreliable transportation, unmet physical- and mental-health needs, caregiving responsibilities, and weak public infrastructure make daily attendance more difficult (Lenhoff & Singer, 2025). Focusing only or disproportionately on the factors that have led to a modest post-pandemic decline in attendance would risk overlooking students who faced the greatest barriers before the pandemic and continue to face them now. Schools can improve attendance systems, strengthen relationships, make instruction more engaging, and connect families with services; but they cannot solve deep out-of-school inequalities on their own. In communities where these barriers are concentrated, durable attendance improvement requires coordination across education, housing, transportation, health, and social-service systems.

The history of school attendance should change not whether we respond to post-pandemic absenteeism, but how we understand and respond to it. The United States has not lost the norm of regular school attendance; rather, it has experienced a modest setback layered onto deeper and more persistent absenteeism in some places. Compressing these distinct problems into a single national crisis risks overstating the first and understating the second. Describing these problems accurately does not mean taking them less seriously; it means responding to each appropriately and proportionately.

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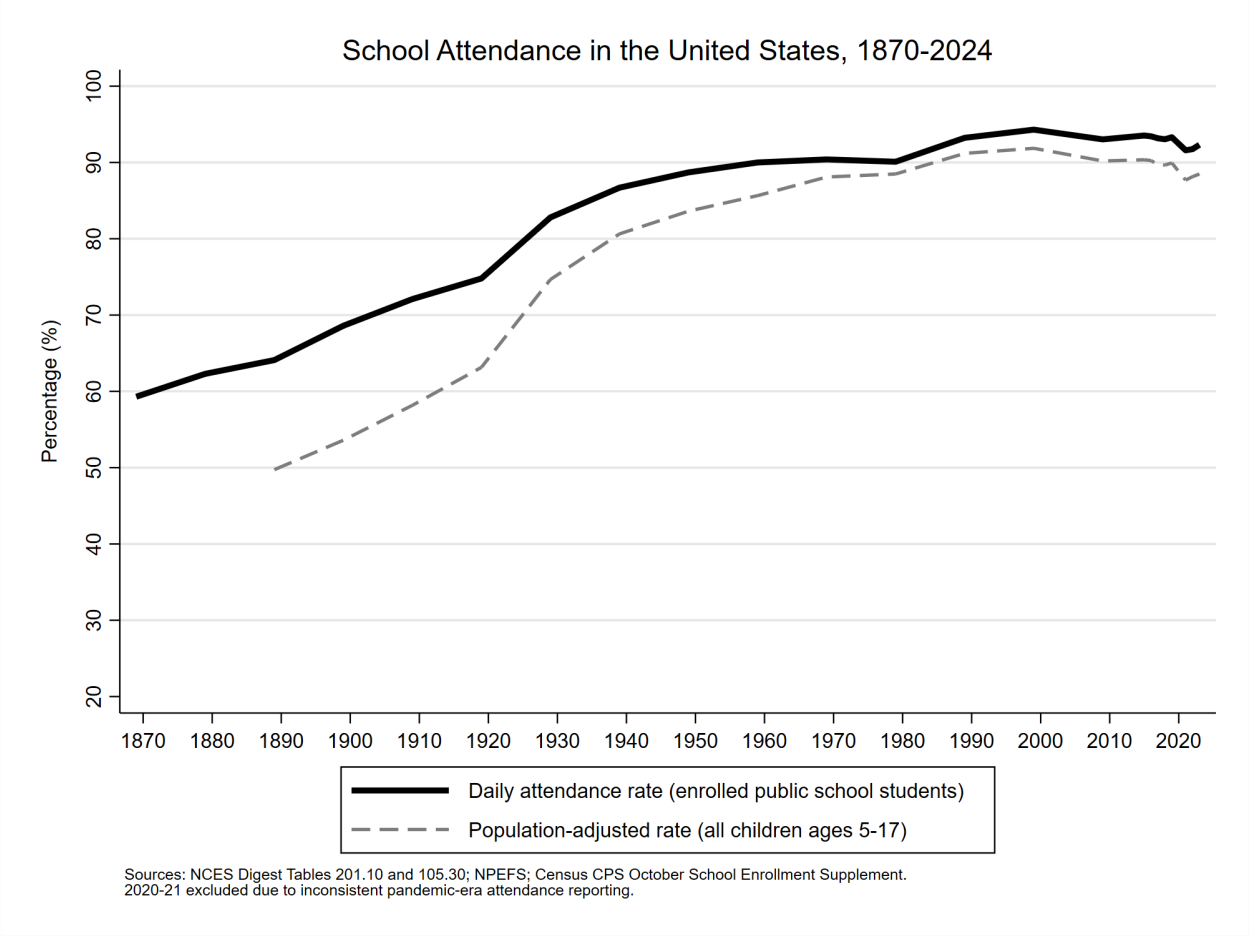
Figures

Figure 1
School Attendance in the United States, 1870-2024



Technical Appendix

Figure 1 presents historical average daily attendance rates for enrolled public-school students, as well as a population-adjusted measure that also accounts for the share of children ages 5-17 enrolled in the regular school system (public or private). This technical appendix describes the sources, construction, and interpretation of those data series. Data and code for replication can be found in the ICPSR data repository (Singer, 2026).

Measures

The first series is the *daily attendance rate*: the percentage of enrolled public-school students present on an average school day. Where the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) reports this percentage directly, the published value is used. In later years, the rate is calculated by dividing national average daily attendance (ADA) by the corresponding public-school enrollment or membership total.

The second series is a *population-adjusted attendance rate*. The conventional ADA rate describes attendance among students already enrolled in public school and therefore does not reflect historical changes in the proportion of children enrolled in school. The population-adjusted measure incorporates this additional margin by multiplying the public-school ADA rate by the estimated percentage of the resident population ages 5-17 enrolled in the regular school system. The resulting measure is best understood as an index that combines public-school attendance intensity with the breadth of formal school enrollment. It is not a direct estimate of attendance among every child. In particular, the available national sources do not provide a comparable historical measure of daily attendance in private schools, so the calculation applies the observed public-school ADA rate to the broader school enrollment share.

Table 1 reports the two series plotted in Figure 1 (public-school ADA rate and population- adjusted attendance rate), the school enrollment share used to calculate the population-adjusted series, and its complement: the share not enrolled in regular school. All values are percentages.

Table 1
Average Daily Attendance and Population-Adjusted Attendance Rates Over Time

School year	Public-school ADA rate (%)	Total school enrollment (%)	Not enrolled in school (%)	Population-adjusted attendance rate (%)
1869-70	59.30	-	-	-
1879-80	62.30	-	-	-
1889-90	64.10	77.60	22.40	49.74
1899-1900	68.60	78.13	21.87	53.60
1909-10	72.10	80.68	19.32	58.17
1919-20	74.80	84.43	15.57	63.15
1929-30	82.80	90.18	9.82	74.67
1939-40	86.70	93.02	6.98	80.64
1949-50	88.70	94.27	5.73	83.62
1959-60	90.00	95.17	4.83	85.65
1969-70	90.40	97.45	2.55	88.09
1979- 80	90.10	98.22	1.78	88.49

School year	Public-school ADA rate (%)	Total school enrollment (%)	Not enrolled in school (%)	Population-adjusted attendance rate (%)
1989-90	93.23	97.81	2.19	91.19
1999-2000	94.30	97.41	2.59	91.86
2009-10	93.03	96.95	3.05	90.19
2015-16	93.54	96.60	3.40	90.36
2016-17	93.43	96.60	3.40	90.25
2017-18	93.17	96.28	3.72	89.70
2018-19	93.04	96.37	3.63	89.66
2019-20	93.31	96.39	3.61	89.94
2021-22	91.60	95.73	4.27	87.69
2022-23	91.75	96.07	3.93	88.14
2023-24	92.32	95.85	4.15	88.49

Note: The not-enrolled share equals 100 minus the school enrollment share. The population-adjusted rate equals the public-school ADA rate multiplied by the school enrollment share. Enrollment shares are unavailable for 1869-70 and 1879-80. Values may differ slightly from calculations due to rounding.

Historical Public-School Attendance and Enrollment

The historical data come primarily from NCES Digest of Education Statistics, Table 201.10 (NCES, 2022d), which reports national public elementary and secondary enrollment, average daily attendance, the percentage of enrolled students attending daily, and the resident population ages 5-17 at selected points from 1869-70 through 2019-20. Values are expressed in thousands. Because the source workbook arranges years across columns, the relevant cells were transcribed into a rectangular CSV file, with the original workbook retained for verification.

For most historical years, the daily attendance rate is the percentage published in Table 201.10. For 2018-19 and 2019-20, when the percentage is not reported, it is calculated from the table's ADA and enrollment totals. The numerator and denominator are kept within the same public-school reporting system and year.

The early population-adjusted series requires an estimate of the share of children enrolled in either public or private elementary and secondary school. Private enrollment comes from NCES Digest Table 105.30 (NCES, 2022b). Only observations through 1985 are retained from this table; the 1985 observation is used solely as an endpoint for interpolating private enrollment in 1979, and projected post-pandemic observations are excluded from the analysis. For 1889-90 through 1979-80, the school enrollment share is calculated as the combined public and private enrollment divided by the resident population ages 5-17. The complement is treated as the share outside school enrollment.

Table 105.30 does not report private enrollment for 1979-80. That value is linearly interpolated between the reported 1969 and 1985 totals. National prekindergarten enrollment is also incompletely observed in the early period. Public prekindergarten is separately reported only beginning in 1980 in NCES Digest Table 203.10 (NCES, 2022c), and comparable historical private prekindergarten counts are unavailable. The early residual therefore treats the reported elementary and secondary totals as the best available measure of school enrollment. Because prekindergarten participation was small relative to total enrollment in the early years, the resulting bias is likely modest, but the historical estimates should not be read as precise annual measurements.

A population-adjusted estimate is not reported for 1869-70 or 1879-80 because the necessary private-school enrollment data are unavailable. The 1989-90 value is interpolated

between the 1979-80 historical estimate and the first modern household-survey estimate in 1999. It serves as a visual bridge between the two data regimes rather than as a directly observed value.

Modern Public and Private School Enrollment Estimates

Beginning in 1999, the enrollment share is estimated from the U.S. Census Bureau's (1999-2023) October Current Population Survey School Enrollment Supplement. The analysis uses observations for 1999, 2009, 2015-2019, and 2021-2023. October of each survey year is assigned to the school year beginning that fall; for example, the October 2023 estimate corresponds to 2023-24.

The analytic population consists of children ages 5-17 with a valid response to the CPS enrollment item. A child is classified as enrolled when PRENR equals 1 and as not enrolled when PRENR equals 0. National estimates are calculated using the School Enrollment Supplement person weight, PWSUPWGT. The weighted enrollment share is the sum of the supplement weights for enrolled children divided by the sum of the weights for all children in the analytic population.

The CPS defines school enrollment as enrollment during the current term or school year in a public, parochial, or other private school within the regular school system. Independent home instruction (i.e., homeschooling) is not included. Children formally enrolled in a public or private program are classified according to that institutional enrollment, including when instruction is delivered remotely. The CPS estimate therefore corresponds closely to the conceptual distinction used here: participation in the regular school system rather than all forms of educational activity.

For reproducibility, the person-level CPS records were obtained through the Census Microdata API (U.S. Census Bureau, 2026) using a separate Stata .do file (Singer, 2026). That program produces one national observation for each selected year, including the weighted enrollment share, its complement, the weighted numerator and denominator, and the unweighted sample size. The principal analysis imports this saved intermediate file rather than downloading the microdata each time it is run.

Post-Pandemic Public School Attendance

For 2021-22 through 2023-24, public-school ADA and membership are drawn from provisional National Public Education Financial Survey files available through the NCES Common Core of Data repository (NCES, n.d.). State totals are summed across the 50 states and the District of Columbia. Territories are excluded so that the geographic coverage corresponds to the national population denominator, and state records with missing or not-applicable codes for ADA or membership are excluded. The national ADA rate is calculated by dividing the resulting ADA total by the corresponding fall membership total.

Population estimates for ages 5-17 in these years come from NCES Digest Table 101.10 (NCES, 2023). Public prekindergarten counts from Table 203.10 and private prekindergarten counts from Digest Table 205.20 (NCES 2022a) are retained in the compiled dataset for descriptive purposes but do not determine the modern enrollment share, which is measured directly with CPS.

The 2020-21 school year is omitted. School closures, remote instruction, changes in attendance policies, and uneven state reporting make national ADA and membership figures for that year difficult to compare with either earlier or later observations. Omitting the year avoids presenting a point that appears precise but does not represent a consistent national attendance

concept.

Limitations and Interpretation

The figure spans more than 150 years, during which the coverage and quality of national education statistics changed substantially. For average daily attendance of public school students, data through the early twentieth century are especially unreliable. As Hutt (2018) documents, attendance records in this period were subject to inconsistent definitions across districts and competing incentives that could inflate or distort figures. Early data should thus be read as indicating broad trajectories rather than precise levels.

The population-adjustment rate is even more tentative, and should be treated as illustrative rather than interpreted as a direct count of children physically present in any school on a given day. It combines a public-school attendance rate with a broader enrollment share under an explicit comparability assumption. Its purpose is to contextualize discussions about post-pandemic attendance, showing contemporary attendance alongside both historical attendance among enrolled students and the expansion of school enrollment more broadly.

The historical enrollment share is an administrative residual constructed from public enrollment, private enrollment, and population totals; and the modern share is a weighted household-survey estimate. The 1989-90 interpolation marks the transition between these approaches. The series is therefore most informative about large, long-run changes rather than small differences across the source transition.

The CPS estimates are subject to sampling error, while the historical estimates are affected by imperfect coverage of private schooling and prekindergarten. The recent NPEFS values are provisional and may be revised. The figure does not display confidence intervals because uncertainty differs in form across the administrative, interpolated, and survey-based portions of the series. Modern CPS standard errors would require use of the applicable replicate weights; analogous sampling errors are not available for the early historical values.

Use of Artificial Intelligence Disclosure

Two generative AI tools—Claude Code (Opus 4.6) through the DAAF framework (Kim, 2026) and ChatGPT (Sol 5.6)—were used to assist with identifying and gathering data sources, preparing and cleaning analytic code, and supporting revisions to the writing. All substantive research decisions, analyses, interpretations, and final written content are the author's own.

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