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Can School Districts Bounce Back from Large Pandemic-Era Chronic Absenteeism Increases?

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SUMMARY

1. Bounce-back is possible.

- Some districts that saw large pandemic-era increases did return to within two percentage points of their pre-pandemic baseline or lower by 2023–2024 or 2024–2025. Bounce-back happened across different locales, district sizes, and Free and Reduced Lunch (FRL) contexts.

2. Bounce-back is still uncommon.

- Among high-increase districts, only 7.71% met the bounce-back threshold by 2023–2024, and 13.01% did so by 2024–2025. While this represents meaningful progress, it still leaves most high-increase districts above pre-pandemic levels.

3. Small and rural districts appear better positioned to bounce back once they experience large increases.

4. Within the high-increase group, rural districts and districts enrolling fewer than 1,000 students were the most likely to bounce back, with roughly one in five meeting the threshold by 2024–25. State differences are real, and the national improvement is not evenly distributed.

- In the small-and-rural subgroup with large increases, the pooled bounce-back rate rose from 12.0% in 2023–2024 to 21.5% in 2024–2025. However, much of the growth was concentrated in a subset of states with large numbers of districts in this group, highlighting the importance of considering state context rather than assuming recovery follows a uniform pattern nationwide.

5. The next research question is what state supports and investments are linked to faster bounce-back.

- Although the data do not establish causality, early signals from California and Iowa warrant further examination of the supports states provided during the post-pandemic period, including funding, guidance, tools, data systems, and technical assistance—and whether particular combinations of these supports are associated with more frequent district bounce-back.

INTRODUCTION

Across the nation, chronic absenteeism rates nearly doubled between 2018-2019 and 2021-22 school years. The pandemic affected all communities, leading to sharp increases in chronic absenteeism across most school districts. Significant increases occurred in urban and rural areas, in both low-income and affluent communities, in districts with historically high rates of chronic absenteeism, and in districts where few students had been chronically absent before the pandemic (Chang et al., 2023; Chang et al., 2024). As a result, reducing chronic absenteeism has become a major priority for most school districts.

Although some districts have shown improvement over the past two years, chronic absenteeism rates in most areas remain above pre-pandemic levels in most places, and recovery has varied across districts. These trends have led some educators and policymakers to question whether elevated rates of chronic absenteeism are the new normal. This also raises a pressing question: Is it possible for a school district to bounce back from large, rapid increases in chronic absenteeism?

This analysis addresses this question by identifying how many districts experienced substantial pandemic-era increases in chronic absenteeism, which types of districts were most affected, and how many returned to close to pre-pandemic levels by the 2023–2024 or 2024–2025 school years. Specifically, we focus on districts that experienced a substantial increase of more than 10 percentage points in chronic absenteeism from their pre-pandemic baseline to 2021–2022, the peak year for chronic absenteeism nationally, and whether those districts were able to reduce their chronic absenteeism rate within two to three school years, to within two percentage points of their pre-pandemic baseline.

We also examine bounce-back patterns by district size, locale, charter status, and FRL student composition. Finally, because our analysis shows that rural districts enrolling fewer than 1,000 students had the highest bounce-back rate, we conduct a focused state-level analysis to identify states that exceeded the national benchmark for recovery among small and rural districts that experienced large increases in chronic absenteeism.

DATA

This analysis primarily uses state-published district-level chronic absenteeism data for 8,586 school districts¹ across 34 states and the District of Columbia for the academic years 2018–2019 (pre-pandemic baseline), 2021–2022 (pandemic period), 2023–2024, and 2024–2025 (post-pandemic) (Malkus, n.d.)². For most jurisdictions, 2018–2019 serves as the pre-pandemic baseline. The only exceptions are Idaho, Iowa, and the District of Columbia, for which state-published data for 2018–2019 were unavailable. For these jurisdictions, we used 2017–2018 chronic absenteeism data from states’ federal reporting as the pre-pandemic baseline. Pandemic and post-pandemic district data for these jurisdictions, as for the rest of the sample, were drawn from state-published district reporting.

Because the chronic absenteeism data come primarily from state-published sources rather than a single federally standardized dataset, rates are not fully standardized across jurisdictions. Although most states when reporting chronic absenteeism data directly define chronic absenteeism as missing 10 percent or more of enrolled instructional time, states may differ in the specific rules used to calculate and report the measure. As a result, comparisons across states should be interpreted with caution. We account for small definitional differences, by setting our bounce-back definition as coming within 2 percentage points of the pre-pandemic baseline. Given these data considerations, the analysis does not focus on comparisons of raw chronic absenteeism rates across states. Instead, it focuses on within-district change over time: whether each district experienced a large increase relative to its own pre-pandemic baseline, and whether it later returned to within two percentage points of that baseline or lower. State-level results therefore reflect differences in bounce-back patterns among districts within each state, rather than direct comparisons of chronic absenteeism levels across states.

¹ Note: The analytic sample’s district composition is broadly similar to the national distribution but is somewhat more rural and less urban. Nationally, districts are 19.2% urban, 23.1% suburban, 15.6% town, and 42.1% rural, compared with 10.8% urban, 23.2% suburban, 17.7% town, and 48.4% rural in the study sample. The sample also includes fewer very small districts and more mid-sized districts than the national distribution. Nationally, 58.1% of districts enroll fewer than 1,000 students and 36.8% enroll 1,000–9,999 students, compared with 49.5% and 44.0% in the sample, respectively. Larger districts are similar in share nationally and in the sample: 4.7% versus 5.9% enroll 10,000–49,999 students, and 0.5% versus 0.5% enroll 50,000 or more; enrollment data are missing for 0.1% of sample districts.

² Note: Chronic absenteeism values come from a compiled “best estimate” dataset that prioritizes state-reported data when available and uses a consistent gap-filling process when components are missing, including deriving missing values from reported rates, numerators, or denominators and, where needed, backfilling from federal sources and CCD enrollment. As a result, some state-years reflect a mix of state and federal inputs and are not fully standardized across states and years. For this reason, results emphasize whether districts meet the study’s bounce-back criteria rather than small differences around the exact pre-pandemic level.

In terms of enrollment, 44.6% of districts with substantial increases in chronic absenteeism enroll fewer than 1,000 students and 47.3% enroll 1,000–9,999 students, while 8.2% enroll 10,000 or more. Compared with all sample districts, there is a somewhat lower share under 1,000 students (44.6% vs. 49.5%) and slightly higher shares in the 1,000–9,999 and 10,000–49,999 categories.

Independent charter districts account for 11.5% of substantial-increase districts, closely aligned with the overall sample (9.6%). FRL composition spans mid-to-high FRL contexts, with 25.5% in the 25–49% range, 25.4% in the 50–74% range, and 18.5% in districts with 75% or more FRL. FRL patterns are broadly similar to the full sample, though the substantial-increase group has a somewhat higher share of missing FRL data (21.7% vs. 18.0%).

Table 1. Distribution of district characteristics among districts with a ≥10 percentage point increase in chronic absenteeism, 2018–2019 to 2021–2022

District characteristic	All sample districts (%)	≥10pp increase districts (%)
Locale		
Urban	10.8	14.4
Suburban	23.2	25.9
Town	17.7	18.2
Rural	48.4	41.5
Enrollment		
<1,000	49.5	44.6
1,000–9,999	44.0	47.3
10,000–49,999	5.9	7.4
≥50,000	0.5	0.8
Missing enrollment data	0.1	
Charter status		
Independent charter district	9.6	11.5
Not an independent charter	90.4	88.5
FRL composition		
<25%	13.7	9.0
25–49%	28.8	25.5
50–74%	23.9	25.4
≥75%	15.5	18.5
Missing FRL data	18.0	21.7

How many districts with large increases bounced back, and what characteristics do they share?

We first examine how many and which types of districts were able to bounce back by 2023-24, within two years of their post-pandemic increase. We then look at districts that bounced back within three years, by 2024-25.

Only a small percentage of the school districts in our sample that experienced substantial increases in chronic absenteeism from pre-pandemic baseline to 2021-2022, were able to rapidly bounce back within two years by the 2023-24 school year. Across the 34 states and the District of Columbia for which we have data, 347 districts (7.71%) saw their chronic absenteeism levels return to near pre-pandemic levels. The districts that were able to bounce back had large reductions in chronic absenteeism from 2021-2022 to 2023-2024, reducing it by 18.44 percentage points on average.

The next question is whether bounce-back patterns differ across districts. In 2023-2024, bounce-back districts were concentrated in rural areas (55.91%), followed by town (18.16%), suburban (15.85%), and urban (10.09%). Moreover, the majority of bounce-back districts were small: 222 districts (63.98%) enrolled fewer than 1,000 students, and 151 districts (43.52%) were both small and rural. Independent charter districts accounted for 13.54% of bounced-back districts (47 districts). These shares are broadly aligned with districts' representation in the overall sample, a point we revisit below when comparing bounce-back rates across contexts.

Across bounced-back districts with FRL data available, recovery was not concentrated in a single FRL composition group. The distribution of bounce-back districts was 12.10% in the under 25% FRL group, 24.78% in the 25–49% group, 27.95% in the 50–74% group, and 22.77% in the 75% or more group. FRL data were missing for 12.39% of bounced-back districts, so these distributions reflect districts with reported FRL composition.

Among the 4,503 districts that experienced substantial pandemic-era increases in chronic absenteeism, a larger but still small share of districts bounced back to within two percentage points of their pre-pandemic baseline or lower by 2024–2025. By the 2024-2025 school year, three years after their post-pandemic high point, 586 (13%) of the school districts in our sample bounced back. This is nearly double the rate achieved by 2023-2024, with 239 more districts bouncing back by 2024-2025 than by 2023-2024. This may indicate that school districts' ability to recover from pandemic-related increases in chronic absenteeism improves over time. From 2021–2022 to 2024–2025, the bounced-back districts improved by 18.32 percentage points on average, again indicating that bounce-back districts experienced substantial reductions in their chronic absenteeism rates.

Bounce-back in 2024–2025 was again concentrated in rural districts (58.19%), followed by town (17.06%), suburban (14.33%), and urban districts (10.41%). It was also most common among small districts: 373 of the 586 bounced-back districts (63.65%) enrolled fewer than 1,000 students, and 270 districts (46.08%) were both small and rural. Independent charter districts accounted for 67 bounced-back districts (11.43%). Across bounced-back districts with FRL data available, recovery was distributed across FRL composition groups, with 9.56% in the under 25% FRL group, 28.83% in the 25–49% group, 27.13% in the 50–74% group, and 17.75% in the 75% or more group.

Overall, by the 2023-24 and 2024-25 school years, only a small share of school districts that experienced large pandemic-era increases were able to return to pre-pandemic levels. Those that were able to bounce back, on average, saw large declines in their chronic absenteeism rates between 2021-2022 and 2023-2024 or 2024-2025. Bounce-back occurred across districts in different locales, of different sizes, and among districts serving varied percentages of low-income students. It occurred in large urban districts and small rural ones. Small and often rural districts with less than 1,000 students produced the greatest number of bounce-back districts, but at a level broadly aligned with their overall representation among all districts. Bounce-back also appears most common across mid-to-high FRL contexts rather than being concentrated among lower-FRL districts.

Table 2. Bounce-back districts summary among districts with ≥ 10 pp increases (N=4,503)

Metric	2023–2024 bounce-back	2024–2025 bounce-back
≥ 10pp increased districts (N)	4,503	4,503
Bounce-back districts (N)	347	586
Bounce-back rate (% of ≥ 10pp increased districts)	7.71%	13.01%
Average improvement from 2021–2022 (pp decrease)	-18.44	-18.32
Locale		
Urban	10.09%	10.41%
Suburban	15.85%	14.33%
Town	18.16%	17.06%
Rural	55.91%	58.19%
Enrolled <1,000 students	63.98%	63.65%
Both small (<1,000) and rural	43.52%	46.08%
Independent charter district	13.54%	11.43%
FRL composition (% of bounce-back districts)⁴		
<25% FRL	12.10%	9.56%
25–49% FRL	24.78%	28.83%
50–74% FRL	27.95%	27.13%
≥ 75 % FRL	22.77%	17.75%

Were certain types of districts better able to bounce back?

Table 3 reports bounce-back rates across all districts in the analytic sample, providing a population-level view of where bounce-back was most common across district contexts. Because the denominator includes districts that may not have experienced large pandemic-era increases, these rates reflect both which districts were most affected and which recovered.

Bounce-back was more common in rural districts than in urban and suburban districts in both years. By the end of the 2024–2025 school year 8.33% of all rural districts were bounce-back districts, compared with 6.72% in urban districts and 4.22% in suburban districts. Being a bounce-back district was also more common in smaller districts: among all districts enrolling fewer than 1,000 students, 8.78% bounced back by 2024–2025, while districts enrolling 10,000–49,999 students show a 2.94% rate. Charter and non-charter districts had similar percentages of bounce-back districts.

⁴ Note: FRL results are reported only for districts with available FRL data

FRL patterns vary, with the 25–49% FRL districts showing the highest bounce-back rate (14.63% in 2024–2025) while those in the under 25% FRL category had much lower rates (2.30%). Because these rates are calculated out of all sample districts, they provide context on which types of districts were more or less likely to experience bounce-back, but they do not isolate recovery among districts with large increases in chronic absenteeism.

Table 3. Distribution of bounce-back districts out of all sample districts

District Characteristic	All sample districts (%)	Bounce-back rate 2023-2024 (% of all sample districts)	Bounce-back rate 2024-2025 (% of all sample districts)
Locale			
Urban	10.8	3.79	6.72
Suburban	23.2	2.76	4.22
Town	17.7	4.22	6.59
Rural	48.4	4.79	8.33
Enrollment			
<1,000	49.5	5.37	8.78
1,000–9,999	44.0	3.12	5.16
10,000–49,999	5.9	1.18	2.94
≥50,000	0.5	2.17	6.52
Charter status			
Independent charter district	9.6	5.80	8.21
Not an independent charter	90.4	3.93	6.75
FRL composition⁵			
<25%	13.7	1.70	2.30
25–49%	28.8	7.31	14.63
50–74%	23.9	4.72	7.73
≥75%	15.5	5.94	7.89

Table 4 shows bounce-back rates among districts that experienced a ≥10 percentage point increase, isolating recovery patterns within the group most in need of rebound. Focusing on districts with large increases allows a clearer test of whether certain district contexts, such as rural or small districts, are more likely to recover after experiencing substantial increases.

Among districts that saw large post-pandemic increases in chronic absenteeism, rural districts had substantially higher bounce-back rates than districts in other locales. By 2024–2025, three years after their post-pandemic chronic absenteeism rate was 10 or more percentage points higher than their pre-pandemic rate, 18.51% of rural districts met the bounce-back threshold, compared with 9.57% of urban districts and 7.20% of suburban districts. This indicates that rural districts were more likely to recover after experiencing large increases in chronic absenteeism.

Bounce-back rates also varied by district size. Districts enrolling fewer than 1,000 students had the highest bounce-back rate (18.58% in 2024–2025), while districts enrolling 10,000–49,999 students had much lower rates (4.52%).

⁵ Note: FRL results are reported only for districts with available FRL data

Bounce-back rates increased sharply from 2023-2024 to 2024-2025 among rural districts and districts enrolling fewer than 1,000 students. As a result, by 2024-2025, nearly one in five rural and small districts in the sample that experienced large pandemic-era increases in chronic absenteeism had returned to near or below pre-pandemic levels.

Districts enrolling 50,000 or more students had bounce-back rates that were less than half those of the smallest districts. However, their bounce-back rate still increased from 2023-2024 to 2024-2025, suggesting that larger districts may require more time to achieve substantial declines in chronic absenteeism.

Charter status did not meaningfully differentiate recovery for districts that experienced large post-pandemic increases in chronic absenteeism, with nearly identical bounce-back rates for independent charter districts (13.13%) and non-charter districts (13.15%). Differences by FRL composition were small, with 2024–2025 bounce-back rates ranging from 12.62% to 15.00% across FRL categories. These findings suggest that some districts serving both higher and lower proportions of low-income students were able to bounce back at similar rates.

Table 4. Distribution of bounce-back districts out of ≥10pp increase districts

District Characteristic	≥10pp increase districts (%)	Bounce-back rate 2023-2024 (% of ≥10pp districts)	Bounce-back rate 2024-2025 (% of ≥10pp districts)
Locale			
Urban	14.4	5.40	9.57
Suburban	25.9	4.72	7.20
Town	18.2	7.80	12.20
Rural	41.5	10.65	18.51
Enrollment			
<1,000	44.6	11.36	18.58
1,000–9,999	47.3	5.54	9.16
10,000–49,999	7.4	1.81	4.52
≥50,000	0.8	2.86	8.57
Charter status			
FRL composition⁶			
<25%	9.0	10.37	14.07
25–49%	25.5	7.50	15.00
50–74%	25.4	8.49	13.91
≥75%	18.5	9.50	12.62

Chronic absenteeism has improved in many places since the pandemic peak, but recovery to pre-pandemic levels has remained limited. Among districts that experienced large pandemic-era increases, only 7.71% had bounced back by 2023–2024 and 13.01% by 2024–2025. Districts that bounced back were able to significantly decrease chronic absenteeism rates by an average of 18 percentage points within two or three years.

⁶ Note: FRL results are reported only for districts with available FRL data

Through 2024-25, bounce-back occurred at the highest rates among rural and small districts, with 18% of them returning to near pre-pandemic levels. This suggests that some rural and small districts may have been better positioned to employ an effective set of responses across all their schools, enabling more rapid declines in chronic absenteeism.

Did states differ in bounce-back rates among rural and small districts?

To explore the role that state-level actions may have played in enabling rural and small districts to recover from large post-pandemic increases in chronic absenteeism, we examined whether bounce-back rates varied across states among rural districts enrolling fewer than 1,000 students. Among the 34 states and the District of Columbia in our sample, the state-level analysis focuses on districts that are both rural and enroll under 1,000 students, and that also experienced a ≥ 10 percentage point increase in chronic absenteeism. Table 5 shows each state’s bounce-back rates for these districts (n=1256). Out of 1,256 districts across all states with rural districts with less than 1,000 students, among the states for which we have data, 151 (12%) bounced back by 2023-2024, and 270 (21.5%) bounced back by 2024-2025, suggesting measurable improvement by the latter year.

Appendices A and B point to a consistent poverty profile among small and rural bounce-back districts. In both years, bounce-back districts are most common in the middle FRL brackets. In 2023–2024, the largest share falls in the 50–74 percent FRL group, followed by 25–49 percent, then 75 percent or more, with the under-25 percent group the smallest. In 2024–2025, the distribution shifts further toward the 25–49 percent FRL group, while the under-25 percent group remains small.

This pattern is also evident in the high-volume states that drive the totals. Iowa and Kansas are heavily concentrated in the 25–49 and 50–74 percent FRL brackets, while California and Missouri include a larger share of districts in the 75 percent or more bracket. The common thread is that recovery in small and rural contexts is most prevalent in moderate-poverty districts rather than in the lowest-poverty districts.

These general trends, however, mask substantial variation across states. Several states exceed the national rate of bounce-back among rural and small districts. This includes Arkansas, California, Colorado, Connecticut, Georgia, Kansas, Missouri, Nebraska, New Mexico, Oklahoma, and Rhode Island in 2023-2024, and California, Connecticut, Georgia, Idaho, Iowa, Kansas, Massachusetts, Missouri, Nebraska, New Mexico, Oklahoma, and Rhode Island in 2024-2025.

Others remain at or near zero bounce-back districts among their rural and small districts in one of the years, such as Alabama, Kentucky, Louisiana, Nevada, South Carolina, and Utah in both years. These state differences should be interpreted alongside the number of districts with large increases in each state, since small eligible counts can produce extreme percentages. For example, rates based on one to four eligible districts can swing sharply with only one additional district.

For identifying “standout” states for follow-up policy scanning, the most informative cases are those that exceed the benchmark and also include a sizable number of small and rural districts that experienced large post-pandemic gains in chronic absenteeism, such as California, Iowa, Kansas, Missouri, and Oklahoma.

Table 5. Bounce-back rates by state among small-and-rural districts with a ≥10 percentage point increase, 2023–2024 and 2024–2025

State	# of Districts with a ≥10 percentage point increase	# of Bounce-back districts (2024)	Bounce-back rate (2024) (% of ≥10pp group)	# of Bounce-back districts (2025)	Bounce-back rate (2025) (% of ≥10pp group)
ALABAMA	2	0	0.0	0	0.0
ARKANSAS	18	6	33.3	3	16.7
CALIFORNIA	173	21	12.1	42	24.3
COLORADO	33	4	12.1	3	9.1
CONNECTICUT	16	2	12.5	4	25.0
GEORGIA	11	2	18.2	4	36.4
IDAHO	35	3	8.6	8	22.9
ILLINOIS	97	5	5.2	12	12.4
INDIANA	14	1	7.1	3	21.4
IOWA	101	4	4.0	42	41.6
KANSAS	86	23	26.7	30	34.9
KENTUCKY	8	0	0.0	0	0.0
LOUISIANA	1	0	0.0	0	0.0
MAINE	67	3	4.5	3	4.5
MASSACHUSETTS	36	3	8.3	8	22.2
MICHIGAN	137	15	10.9	24	17.5
MISSISSIPPI	14	1	7.1	0	0.0
MISSOURI	104	16	15.4	24	23.1
NEBRASKA	41	8	19.5	9	22.0
NEVADA	2	0	0.0	0	0.0
NEW MEXICO	15	7	46.7	4	26.7
NORTH DAKOTA	37	3	8.1	4	10.8
OHIO	53	1	1.9	8	15.1
OKLAHOMA	43	14	32.6	16	37.2
OREGON	56	2	3.6	8	14.3
RHODE ISLAND	4	1	25.0	2	50.0
SOUTH CAROLINA	2	0	0.0	0	0.0
SOUTH DAKOTA	27	3	11.1	5	18.5
UTAH	14	0	0.0	0	0.0
VIRGINIA	8	3	37.5	3	37.5
WEST VIRGINIA	1	0	0.0	1	100.0
Grand Total	1256	151	12.0	270	21.5

Exceeds national average for bounce back rate

The uneven distribution across states in both the number of rural and small districts experiencing large increases in chronic absenteeism and the rate at which these districts bounce back results in a relatively small set of states (8) driving the national outcome in the sample. In 2024–2025, California and Iowa alone account for 84 of 270 bounce-back districts, and California, Idaho, Iowa, Kansas, Massachusetts, Missouri, Nebraska, and Oklahoma together account for 179.

The standout states do not follow the same pattern in post-pandemic increases and recovery. Some states have a high share of small and rural districts that experienced large pandemic-era increases and subsequently show steady, above-average bounce-back rates. This pattern suggests widespread increases in chronic absenteeism paired with steady recovery. California is the clearest example of this profile.

Other states stand out because their small and rural districts with large increases in chronic absenteeism bounce back at high rates, even when relatively few small and rural districts experienced such increases post-pandemic. Oklahoma fits this second profile. Iowa and Kansas combine both, with many small and rural districts showing large increases in chronic absenteeism alongside especially high bounce-back rates, making them strong candidates for follow-up policy scanning.

CONCLUSION

The question we began with was whether school districts were able to bounce back from large increases in chronic absenteeism during the pandemic. More specifically, we examined how many and what types of districts that experienced at least a 10 percentage point increase in chronic absenteeism from the pre-pandemic baseline (2017–18 or 2018–19) to 2021–22 were able to reduce chronic absenteeism to within two percentage points of their pre-pandemic baseline, or lower, by 2023–24 or 2024–25. Our findings show that recovery is possible. Districts across a range of locales, sizes, and student populations were able to bounce back from large increases in chronic absenteeism. Bounce-back districts include urban, suburban, town, and rural districts. Many enroll fewer than 1,000 students (as do the majority of school districts in the 34 states we examined), while some enroll more than 50,000. Districts serving lower proportions of low-income students bounced back, including those in which 75% or more of the students came from low-income families. Charter schools bounced back at the same rate as district schools.

We also found that bouncing back from large post-pandemic gains in chronic absenteeism within two to three years was quite rare. By 2023-24 (two years after the peak in chronic absenteeism), only 7.7 % of districts had returned to near pre-pandemic levels. By 2024-25, three years after the peak, this figure increased to 13%. The district that bounced back saw substantial reductions in chronic absenteeism, with an average decline of 18 percentage points. Bounce-back was most common among small districts enrolling fewer than 1,000 students and among rural districts. In both cases, 18% of these districts had bounced back by 2024-25.

This rate of improvement should not be dismissed because the districts are small⁷. If a district of 900 students had a 33% chronic absenteeism rate in 2021-22, this would result in 297 chronically absent students. An 18-percentage point reduction in chronic absenteeism (the average for small bounce-back districts) would decrease the chronic absenteeism rate to 15 percent or 135 chronically absent students, representing a decrease of about 162 chronically absent students. In Appendix C, additional examples of the impact of bouncing back in small rural districts can be seen with data from Iowa.

⁷ See Appendix C for an example of Iowa

State-level results reinforce the unevenness in recovery. Among small-and-rural districts that experienced large pandemic-era increases in chronic absenteeism, bounce-back varies widely by state, and much of the national improvement was concentrated in a subset of states. These findings suggest that bouncing back is not just a function of district size or rural locale.

It is plausible that smaller districts with 1,000 or fewer students, which are often rural, may have an easier path to recovery because improvement efforts need to occur across only a small number of schools, perhaps two to four, rather than across dozens of schools in a larger district. However, many small and rural districts with these conditions did not bounce back. Thus, it is possible that the size advantages of small districts are only realized when they occur within more supportive state contexts.

Thus, a key follow up research question is what are the standout states doing to decrease their chronic absenteeism rates and why does it seem most effective for rural and smaller districts? A productive next step is to examine what supports states made available during the initial post-pandemic years, such as funding, guidance, tools, data systems, accountability structures, and technical assistance, and whether certain combinations of supports are associated with higher bounce-back or whether states were able to support higher rates of bounce-back among small and rural districts in different ways.

California offers one example of why this next step matters. In this analysis, California stood out because it had a substantial number of rural and small districts with large pandemic-era increases in chronic absenteeism, yet its 2024-2025 bounce-back rate for these districts was above the national average. Although the state has not fully recovered, its above-average rebound occurred in a policy environment marked by multi-level action, public data use, local accountability for chronic absenteeism, and whole-student support.

At the statutory level, SB 691 revised initial truancy notifications by removing prosecution-centered language and requiring notices to include information about mental health and supportive services, school-family meetings, and strategies to support regular attendance (California Senate Bill 691, 2024). At the state level, California made a historic \$4.1 billion investment in community schools, with early evidence showing that schools supported through the California Community Schools Partnership Program reduced chronic absence more than matched comparison schools (Swain et al., 2025). It also increased funding for expanded learning and provided state funding to supplement federal funding for pandemic recovery.

The California Department of Education also released a statewide Attendance Guide and maintains a Chronic Absenteeism Indicator on the California School Dashboard, reflecting an emphasis on coordinated action, public data use, local accountability, and student support (California Department of Education, 2025a, 2025b).

While California illustrates a large-state example with broad statewide, regional, and district-level efforts, Iowa offers a useful contrast from a more rural state context. Iowa has developed a structured attendance response that combines legislation, policy guidance, prevention planning, data systems, and tiered supports.

Iowa provides technical assistance on attendance coding, an Absenteeism Prevention Plan template, and attendance support guidance aligned with Multi-Tiered System of Support (MTSS) and continuous improvement cycles (Iowa Department of Education, 2025; Iowa Department of Education, n.d.-b; Iowa Department of Education, n.d.-c). MTSS is a framework that helps schools organize supports across universal, targeted, and intensive tiers, using data such as attendance to identify needs and monitor whether interventions are working. Iowa DOE's MTSS-aligned attendance guidance asks schools to use attendance, behavior, student, family, and community data to identify needs, monitor interventions, and determine when students need supplemental or intensive support.



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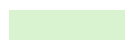
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Office of the Governor (2024). *Senate File 2435*. Office of the Governor. <https://www.legis.iowa.gov/legislation/BillBook?ga=90&ba=sf2435>

APPENDICES

Appendix A. Number of Small and Rural Bounce-Back Districts by State and District Characteristics, 2023-2024

State	Total # of Small & Rural Bounce-back Districts	# of Districts with FRL <25	# of Districts with FRL 25-49	# of Districts with FRL 50-74	# of Districts with FRL ≥75	# of Charter Districts
ALABAMA	0	0	0	0	0	0
ARKANSAS	6	0	0	2	4	0
CALIFORNIA	21	2	2	9	8	2
COLORADO	4	1	3	0	0	0
CONNECTICUT	2	2	0	0	0	0
DELAWARE	0	0	0	0	0	0
GEORGIA	2	ND	ND	ND	ND	0
IDAHO	3	0	1	0	2	0
ILLINOIS	5	0	3	2	0	0
INDIANA	1	0	1	0	0	0
IOWA	4	2	1	1	0	0
KANSAS	23	3	9	11	0	0
KENTUCKY	0	0	0	0	0	0
LOUISIANA	0	0	0	0	0	0
MAINE	3	0	2	1	0	0
MASSACHUSETTS	3	ND	ND	ND	ND	0
MICHIGAN	15	1	3	10	1	2
MISSISSIPPI	1	0	0	0	1	0
MISSOURI	16	2	5	4	5	0
NEBRASKA	8	2	4	2	0	0
NEVADA	0	0	0	0	0	0
NEW MEXICO	7	0	1	1	5	0
NORTH DAKOTA	3	2	1	0	0	0
OHIO	1	ND	ND	ND	ND	0
OKLAHOMA	14	0	3	3	8	0
OREGON	2	ND	ND	ND	ND	1
RHODE ISLAND	1	0	1	0	0	1
SOUTH CAROLINA	0	0	0	0	0	0
SOUTH DAKOTA	3	1	0	0	2	0
UTAH	0	0	0	0	0	0
VIRGINIA	3	0	1	2	0	0
WEST VIRGINIA	0	0	0	0	0	0
Grand Total	151	18	41	48	36	6

 Exceeds national average for bounce back rate

Appendix B. Number of Small and Rural Bounce-Back Districts by State and District Characteristics, 2024-2025

State	Total # of Small & Rural Bounce-back Districts	# of Districts with FRL <25	# of Districts with FRL 25-49	# of Districts with FRL 50-74	# of Districts with FRL ≥75	# of Charter Districts
ALABAMA	0	0	0	0	0	0
ARKANSAS	3	0	0	2	1	0
CALIFORNIA	42	2	9	15	16	3
COLORADO	3	0	2	1	0	0
CONNECTICUT	4	0	3	1	0	0
DELAWARE	0	0	0	0	0	0
GEORGIA	4	ND	ND	ND	ND	1
IDAHO	8	2	3	1	2	1
ILLINOIS	12	1	7	4	0	0
INDIANA	3	0	3	0	0	2
IOWA	42	4	33	5	0	0
KANSAS	30	2	10	18	0	0
KENTUCKY	0	0	0	0	0	0
LOUISIANA	0	0	0	0	0	0
MAINE	3	0	1	2	0	0
MASSACHUSETTS	8	ND	ND	ND	ND	0
MICHIGAN	24	0	5	16	3	4
MISSISSIPPI	0	0	0	0	0	0
MISSOURI	24	3	7	4	10	0
NEBRASKA	9	2	6	1	0	0
NEVADA	0	0	0	0	0	0
NEW MEXICO	4	0	1	0	3	0
NORTH DAKOTA	4	2	2	0	0	0
OHIO	8	ND	ND	ND	ND	0
OKLAHOMA	16	1	4	5	6	0
OREGON	8	ND	ND	ND	ND	2
RHODE ISLAND	2	1	1	0	0	1
SOUTH CAROLINA	0	0	0	0	0	0
SOUTH DAKOTA	5	2	0	1	2	0
UTAH	0	0	0	0	0	0
VIRGINIA	3	0	0	3	0	0
WEST VIRGINIA	1	0	0	0	0	0
Grand Total	270	22	97	79	43	14

Exceeds national average for bounce back rate

Appendix C. Iowa Example of District Detail for Rural and Small (Less than 1000 students enrolled) School Districts that Bounced Back

District	Enrollment	Chronic Absenteeism (2018, %)	Chronic Absenteeism (2022, %)	Chronic Absenteeism (2025, %)	Chronic Absenteeism (2022, N)	Chronic Absenteeism (2025, N)	No Longer Chronically Absent
Olin Consolidated School District	72	17.5	35.7	16.7	26	12	14
South Hamilton Com School District	664	7.0	22.1	5.0	147	33	114
Postville Com School District	657	12	24.5	10.3	161	67	94
Highland Com School District	519	9.0	19.7	10.1	102	52	50

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