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May 23, 2024

The Honorable Miguel Cardona
Secretary of Education
U.S. Department of Education
400 Maryland Ave, SW
Washington, D.C. 20202

Dear Secretary Cardona,

I write to call your attention to the growing crisis of chronic absenteeism among American students.

A student is typically considered chronically absent if they are absent from school for more than ten percent of school days by the end of the year, regardless of the reason. According to federal data, 29.7 percent of the nation’s students, nearly 14.7 million, were chronically absent in the 2021-2022 school year.¹ This is a 6.5 million increase from the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Department’s website highlights the many devastating impacts of chronic absenteeism, such as a dramatic increase in the likelihood of dropping out among high schoolers, an increase in missed early learning milestones, and an increased risk of poverty, diminished health, and involvement with the criminal justice system.

In my home state of Arizona, the percentage of chronically absent students was 28 percent in the most recent year on record, more than double the rate of the school year before the pandemic.² This mirrors the national trend of sharp increases during the pandemic that either plateaued or continued to rise at alarming rates. Arizona is also home to many Native American students, the population with the highest rate of chronic absenteeism in America.³

The alarmingly high rates of chronic absenteeism around the country necessitate urgent action from the federal government. In the absence of comprehensive action, our nation risks leaving an entire generation of students behind.

¹ <https://www.pbs.org/newshour/nation/chronic-absenteeism-is-up-across-the-country-school-leaders-are-trying-to-address-why#:~:text=Some%2029.7%20percent%20of%20the,time%2C%20according%20to%20federal%20data.>

² <https://www.azcentral.com/story/news/local/arizona-education/2024/04/12/arizona-kids-still-missing-school-far-more-than-before-the-pandemic/73185922007/>

³ <https://www2.ed.gov/datastory/chronicabsenteeism.html>

To that end, I respectfully request answers to the following questions:

- What resources exist for states and local authorities to receive federal assistance to combat chronic absenteeism?
- What resources can Congress provide to ease the burden on thinly stretched state and local budgets?
- What coordination exists between the Department of Education and local governments to monitor and combat chronic absenteeism?
- Which chronic absenteeism-related interventions does the Department suggest Congress prioritize supporting?

I also call on you to make public a national plan to combat absenteeism, in coordination with other related Departments agencies, and to appoint a point person on absenteeism. With a system as segmented as the United States education system, national level problems require national coordination, including sharing best practices, resources, and technical assistance.

Thank you for your attention to this important issue. I look forward to your response.

Sincerely,



Ruben Gallego
MEMBER OF CONGRESS