

Reasons for Chronic Absenteeism Among Florida Secondary Students

Survey Summary Report

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Table of Contents

Contact Information	3
Executive Summary	4
Introduction.....	5
Participants & Findings.....	7
Summary of Findings	18

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Executive Summary

This report presents information on the results of the Reasons for Chronic Absenteeism (RCA) survey for secondary students. The data were collected directly from 4,772 chronically absent 6th-12th grade Florida students from October through December, 2016. Participants were selected based upon having missed 10% or more of instructional days during the 2015/2016 school year. The students rated survey items on a 0-3 scale which represented the reasons that they “never,” “rarely,” “sometimes,” or “usually” missed school. The percentage of students who rated items within each category as “sometimes” or “usually” (rating of 2 or 3) the reason for missing school are calculated. The report provides information about their perceptions of how often they miss school, common barriers to attendance experienced by secondary students, and ideas for improving attendance. The information provided by the survey may be used to inform a data-based problem-solving process that includes the development of evidence-based interventions.

Findings

Perceptions of Absences. In an effort to better understand students’ perception of their own absences, students were asked to provide their number of absences during the previous school year. Forty-one percent (41%) of the students recalled and/or reported absences consistent with chronic absenteeism. This finding may suggest an intervention opportunity to increase student awareness of absences and implications associated with chronic absenteeism.

When students were asked about their absences in relation to peers, 58.9% of students perceived their absence rate to be the same or less than peers. This response may indicate a skewed perception of what is considered typical absence rates and indicate an intervention opportunity for correcting misconceptions and building awareness of good attendance patterns.

Reasons for Absences. Common barriers experienced by students were identified by determining the percentage of students who endorsed an item as “sometimes” or “usually” the reason they missed school. The top reported reasons for chronic absenteeism among students were related to **health** [92.4%] (short-term illness, chronic illness and medical/dental/mental health appointments), **transportation** [54.8%] (missing the bus, car problems, not wanting to walk in bad weather and being out-of-town), **personal stress** [41.1%] (depression/sadness, stressed/upset, family emergencies), **preferred activity outside of school** [41.1%] (hung out with family/friends, stayed up too late/overslept, substance use), and **value of school** [38.9%] (perceptions that school is boring, no reason to come to school, belief that school will not help reach future goals, perception that parents don’t care if absent from school).

Ideas for Improving Attendance. The students provided ideas for supports to improve attendance by responding to open-ended prompts. Top ideas included: **decreased level of difficulty/strictness** (less homework, more fair/consistent rules, more lenient dress codes), **engaging environments** (more interesting/fun/relevant/hands-on classes or instruction), **illness prevention** (not getting sick), **improved climate/relationships** (nicer peers or adults, less “drama”, less bullying), and **academic support** (tutoring, better instruction, additional help from teachers).

Introduction

Chronic absenteeism, commonly defined as missing 10% or more of instructional days per school year, has significant impact on student outcomes. It is associated with decreased reading levels, overall academic performance, on-time graduation rates, and post-secondary enrollment as well as increased dropout rates.^{1,2} Fortunately, chronic absenteeism rates are alterable at the student and system level when interventions are appropriately targeted and matched to student needs.

In order to efficiently and effectively match interventions to student needs, there is a need for reliable and valid data that provide sufficient information to understand the various challenges students experience. The Reasons for Chronic Absenteeism (RCA) Survey was developed to meet this need. RCA items were developed based on research and theory related to multifaceted reasons that students miss school. The items were reviewed for clarity, relevance, and necessity by an expert panel that was comprised of national, state, district, and school level stakeholders who have experience with dropout prevention, attendance, truancy, or school refusal. Items that did not meet 70% agreement in each of the dimensions (clarity, relevance, necessity) were altered based on reviewer feedback or eliminated.

After revisions, the items were then used in cognitive interviews with chronically absent middle and high school students to ensure that they perceived the items as intended. The students read the items aloud and verbalized their thoughts about what they thought the items were asking and how they would respond based on their experiences. The students provided feedback related to item language, content, clarity, and overall organization of the instrument. The items were again adjusted based on information gained during the cognitive interviews. The final version of the RCA used in the validation study was comprised of 13 demographics/perception of absences questions; 41 items measuring multifaceted reasons for absences; and three open-ended questions asking about other reasons for missing school, the reasons they do come to school, and what would help them come to school more often. The data were summarized at the school, district, and state level.

This RCA report provides information about common barriers to attendance experienced by secondary students that may be used to inform a data-based problem-solving process that includes the development of evidence-based interventions. This report provides an overview of common barriers experienced by students in Florida as measured by the percentage of students who endorsed an item as “sometimes” or “usually” the reason they missed school. The barriers are organized around the following 12 categories:

- Health Related
- Personal Stress
- Physical Safety/Conflict
- School Climate
- School Stress
- Adult Responsibilities
- Housing/Material Instability
- Legal System Involvement
- Suspension
- Transportation
- Preferred Activity Outside of School
- Value of School

¹ Balfanz, R., & Byrnes, V. (2012). *Chronic Absenteeism: Summarizing what we know from nationally available data*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Center for Social Organization of Schools.

² Chang, H. & Romero, M. (2008). *Present, engaged and accounted for the critical importance of addressing chronic absence in the early grades*. National Center for Children in Poverty (NCCP): The Mailman School of Public Health at Columbia University.

In addition, the report provides student perceptions of their own number of absences and absence rates relative to peers. Also provided are student reports of perceived existing resources or motivators for school attendance and what they think would help them attend school more regularly or miss fewer days. More detailed information for each of the categories and student responses within each category are included below, followed by a summary of key findings and questions for state-level stakeholders who are responsible for or are interested in addressing barriers to improving chronic absenteeism rates.

Participants & Findings

Participants

The data provided are based on 4,772 secondary school students from 10 school districts and 62 middle and high schools within the state of Florida. The data were collected via student surveys from October through December of 2016. Districts were recruited for participation through a variety of means: flyers at conferences; promotion at state-wide conferences; promotion in state disseminated discretionary project newsletters; emails to district multi-tiered system of supports (MTSS) and positive behavior intervention and support (PBIS) contacts; emails via national listservs for PBIS, MTSS, and attendance; webinars for regional state-level MTSS professional learning communities; and a webinar for a national state-level attendance association.

Participant districts selected which schools would participate in the survey. The researchers provided a one-hour webinar for each participant district/school that provided background information on chronic absenteeism, survey development, administration procedures, and review of the survey items and data collection platform (SurveyMonkey®). Schools identified eligible students for participation (i.e., students with at least 18 absences during the previous school year) and facilitated the collection of survey data.

The participant districts were representative of the range of districts throughout the state from small to very large. The average chronic absenteeism rate among the participant districts (based on the rates from the participant schools) ranged from 5.6% to 32.8%, and the number of reportedly chronic absent students per participant school ranged from 22 to 593. The participant districts survey completion rates varied from a low of 23.9% to a high of 83.7%. The participant school survey completion rates were a bit more disparate with a low of 6% and a high of 100% for several schools who surveyed all of their reported chronically absent students. The table below provides a summary of the participant district chronic absenteeism and survey completion rates.

Table 1

Participant District Summary

Participant District	District Size Designation	Number of Participant Schools	Average of Reported Chronic Absenteeism Rate for Participant Schools	Range of the Number of Chronically Absent Students per School	Average Percentage of Reported Chronically Absent Students Surveyed	Range of the Reported Chronically Absent Students Surveyed per School
District 1	Small	8	32.8%	24-401	64.4%	52-94%
District 2	Small/ Medium	7	15.1%	22-194	52.6%	38-59%
District 3	Small	4	15.5%	74-216	52.8%	38-70%
District 4	Very Large	12	6.2%	40-135	75.8%	22-100%
District 5	Small	2	28.9%	119-248	44.0%	43-45%
District 6	Large	8	18.3%	136-593	46.5%	6-84%
District 7	Small/Medium	3	5.6%	29-43	50.5%	31-70%
District 8	Small/Medium	7	21.9%	38-335	83.7%	51-100%
District 9	Small/Medium	3	13.4%	97-213	45.3%	27-64%
District 10	Very Large	10	24.0%	187-378	23.9%	7-45%

Table 2 provides an overview of the participant student demographics.

Table 2

Participant Student Summary Demographics

Selected Demographics	Percentage
Free/Reduced Lunch Eligible	72.3
Receive Exceptional Student Education	17.3
English Not Primary Language	6.4
Mother's Education- High School or GED	53.0
Mother's Education- College Degree	26.8
Gender	
Male	50.4
Female	48.5
Other	1.1
Race/Ethnicity	
Multiracial	10.8
Asian	1.1
Black/African American	16.8
Hispanic/Latino	17.3
White	49.8
American Indian	1.2
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	0.2
Prefer not to Say	2.9
Grade-Level	
6 th	17.3
7 th	18.0
8 th	19.2
9 th	13.0
10 th	12.9
11 th	9.8
12 th	9.8

The majority of students who participated in the survey were eligible for free or reduced price lunch and reported their mother's education level to be "some high school", "high school diploma", or "GED". There were slightly higher than the state average of students with disabilities (13%) who participated in the survey. These data are consistent with research indicating that students with disabilities and those from economically disadvantaged households are often over-represented within the chronically absent student population.

There was a fairly equal distribution of males versus females with 1% identifying as Other (transitioning, transgendered, etc.). Roughly half of the survey participants identified as White and the majority reported being in middle grades.

Findings

Table 3 below provides an overview of the percentage of all students who rated items in each category as “sometimes” or “usually” the reason(s) they missed school. Health Related reasons (92.4% endorsed an item within this domain as “sometimes” or “usually” the reason they missed school) were the most commonly reported, followed by Transportation (54.8%), Personal Stress (41.1%), and Preferred Activity Outside of School (41.1%). On the following pages, more detailed information is provided for each of the categories.

Table 3

Percentage of Endorsements by Category

Overall Responses	
Reason	Percentage
Health Related	92.4
Transportation	54.8
Personal Stress	41.1
Preferred Activity Outside of School	41.1
Value of School	38.9
School Stress	34.6
School Climate	32.6
Safety/Conflict	21.1
Adult Responsibility	17.3
Legal System Involvement	15.6
Housing/Material Instability	14.1
Suspension	10.4

Perceptions of Absences

In order to be eligible to participate in the survey, students had to have missed 18 or more (10%) days of school during the 2015/2016 school year. Table 4 provides a summary of student **perceptions** of the number of school days they missed during the 2015/2016 school year. Approximately 41% of students accurately recalled and/or reported absences consistent with chronic absenteeism. This finding may suggest an intervention opportunity to increase student awareness of absences and implications associated with chronic absenteeism.

Table 4

Absences Last Year

Reported Number of Absences Last Year	Percentage
0-5 days	14.6
6-10 days	22.2
11-15 days	22.3
16-20 days	17.4
21+ days	23.4

Students were asked to report on their perceived number of absences within the last month. This statistic may be an indicator of students who are on-pace to be chronically absent during a given year. As few as two absences per month can lead to 18 or more days of school missed per year. Approximately 67% of students reported two or more absences in the previous month indicating they may have had an increased likelihood of chronic absenteeism during the school year in which they were surveyed.

Table 5

Absences Last Month

Reported Number of Absences Last Month	Percentage
0-1 days	32.7
2-3 days	41.6
4+ days	25.6

In an attempt to better understand student perceptions about the frequency of their absences, students were asked to report if they perceived they had the same, fewer, or greater number of absences relative to other students. Over one-half of students (58.9%) perceived their absence rate to be the same or less than peers. This rate may indicate a skewed perception of what is considered typical absence rates and indicate an intervention opportunity for correcting misconceptions and building awareness of good attendance patterns.

Table 6

Absences Compared to Others

Absence Rate Compared to Peers	Percentage
Absence Rate Less than Peers	26.5
Absence Rate the Same as Peers	32.4
Absence Rate More than Peers	41.1

Resources/Motivators

To better understand student perceptions of resources or motivators for school attendance, students were asked to identify the reasons that they do come to school. The student responses were then organized into themes, and each instance in which a theme was mentioned was calculated and aggregated. Table 7 provides the top reported reasons for school attendance which were Value of Education (Desire to learn, future goals, to get an education), followed by Peer Relationships. It is interesting to note that despite the survey participants having been identified as chronically absent in the previous school year, many recognized that school is a means to achieve future goals and necessary for obtaining a foundational education. This finding may reflect a lack of understanding of the impact of chronic absenteeism on educational outcomes (course performance, graduation and/or dropout rates, etc.).

Table 7

Reasons for School Attendance

Top 5 Responses	
Motivator	Instances Mentioned
Value of Education (Desire to learn, future goals, to get an education)	2556
Peer Relationships	1605
School Activities (Clubs, sports, extra-curricular activities)	590
Required- Unspecified (I have to)	148
Parent Support (Parent expectation/support for attendance)	140

Supports

Students were asked to provide ideas for what they thought would help them attend school more regularly. Table 8 indicates that the top reported support to improve attendance was to address the Level of Difficulty/Strictness (less homework, more fair rules, lenient dress code), which was closely followed by creating an Engaging Environment (more interesting/fun instruction or classes, more hands-on activities).

Table 8

Supports to Improve Attendance

Top 5 Responses	
Supports	Instances Mentioned
Level of Difficulty/ Strictness (Less homework, more fair rules, lenient dress code)	437
Engaging Environment (More interesting/ fun instruction or classes, more hands-on)	407
Illness Prevention (If I didn't get sick)	358
Improved Climate/Relationships (Nicer peers/adults, less drama, less bullying)	333
Academic Support (Tutoring, better teachers, help from teachers)	241

Response by Category

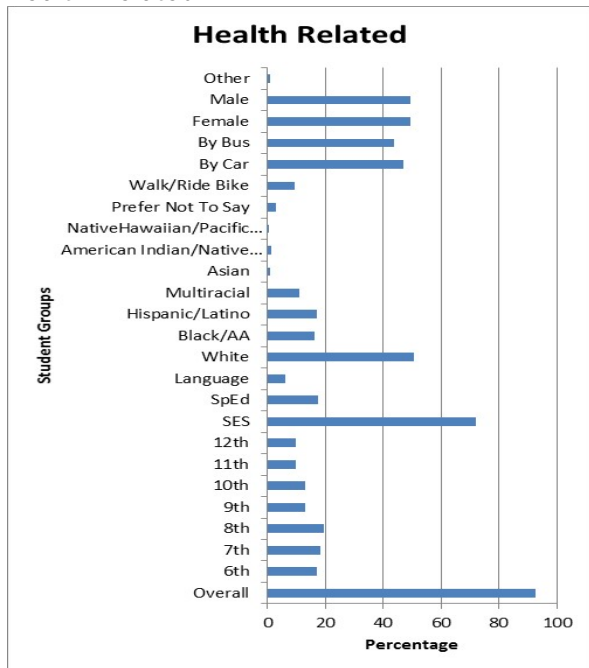
Health Related

Health Related barriers were reported by 92.4% of the chronically absent students to be the reasons they missed school “sometimes” or “usually”. Health Related barriers were the most frequently reported reasons for students missing school among all the categories. Items within the health related category measured short-term (cold, flu, etc.) and chronic illnesses (asthma, allergies, disease), medical appointments and the perception of becoming or getting sick while at school.

Within grade levels, 6th, 7th, and 8th grade students reported missing school for health related reasons to a slightly greater extent than did students from other grade-levels. Among student subgroups, students who identify as White, and those who qualify for free or reduced price lunch, reported health related reasons for missing school most often.

Figure 1

Health Related



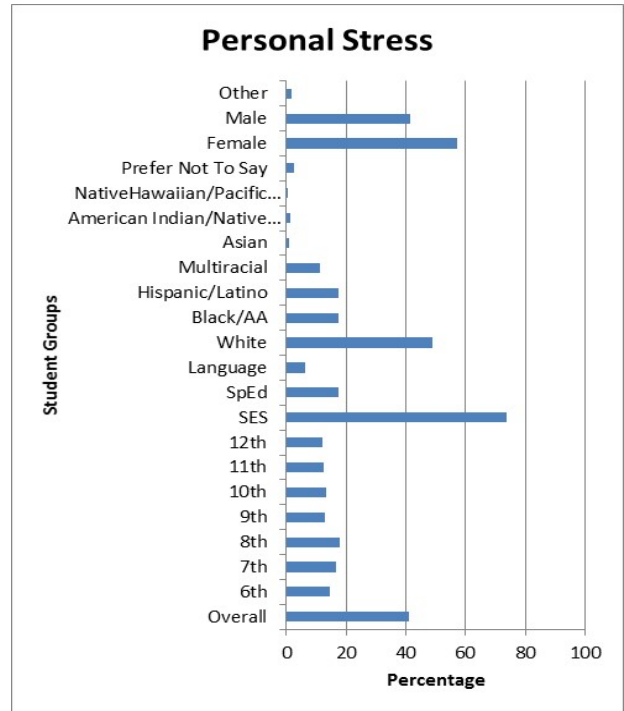
Personal Stress

Personal Stress was reported as “sometimes” or “usually” the reason for missing school by 41.1% of the chronically absent students. Personal Stress included items that measured perceived levels of stress; depression or sadness; being too “upset” to attend school; or family emergencies that may include death, illness, injury, or “drama”.

Within grade levels, 6th, 7th, and 8th grade students reported missing school for personal stress related reasons to a slightly greater extent than did students from other grade-levels. Among student subgroups, students who identify as Female, those who identify as White, and those who qualify for free or reduced price lunch reported missing school due to personal stress most often.

Figure 2

Personal Stress



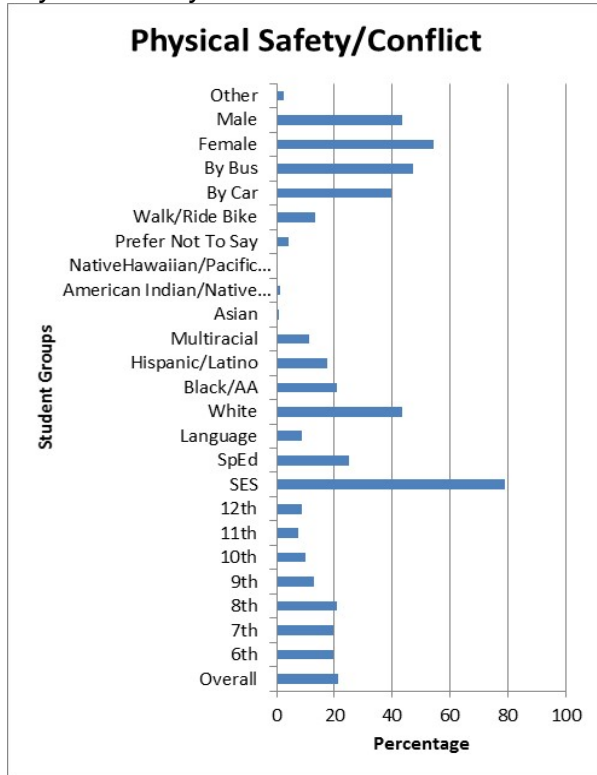
Physical Safety/Conflict

Physical Safety/Conflict reasons were endorsed by 21.1% of students overall. Items in the Physical Safety/Conflict category measured student perceptions of safety on the bus ride or walk to/from school, safety while at school, teasing/bullying, or avoidance of other students due to conflict.

Within grade levels, 6th, 7th, and 8th grade students reported missing school for physical safety/conflict related reasons to a slightly greater extent than did students from other grade-levels. Among student subgroups, students who identify as Female, those who identify as Black/African American or White, those who receive special education, and those who qualify for free or reduced price lunch reported missing school due to physical safety/conflict most often.

Figure 3

Physical Safety/Conflict



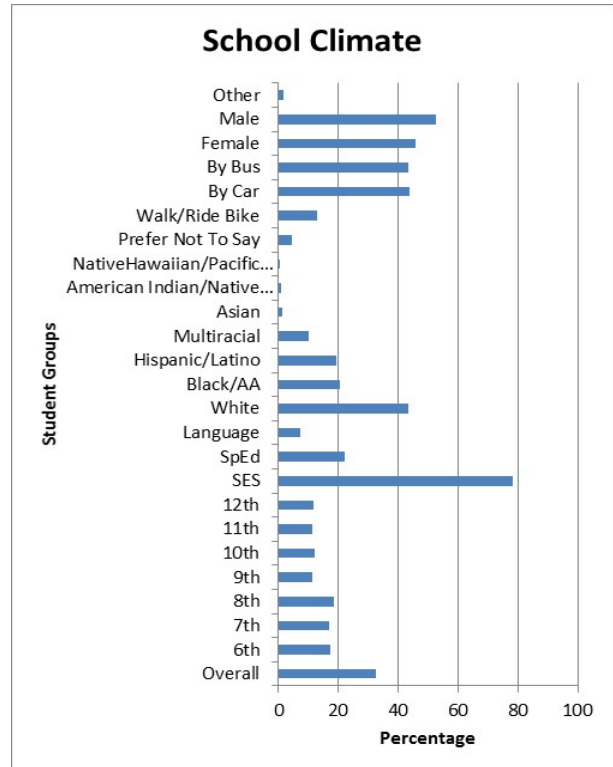
School Climate

School Climate barriers were reported as “sometimes” or “usually” the reasons for missing school by 32.6% of the chronically absent students. School Climate included items that measured student perceptions of the physical environment of the school (condition, cleanliness, basic supplies) as well as the affective environment (perceived fairness of rules/discipline practices, kindness of others, recognition of absences by others).

Within grade levels, 6th, 7th, and 8th grade students reported missing school for school climate related reasons to a slightly greater extent than did students from other grade-levels. Among student subgroups, students who identify as Hispanic/Latino, Black/African American, or White; those who receive special education, and those who qualify for free or reduced price lunch reported missing school due to school climate most often.

Figure 4

School Climate



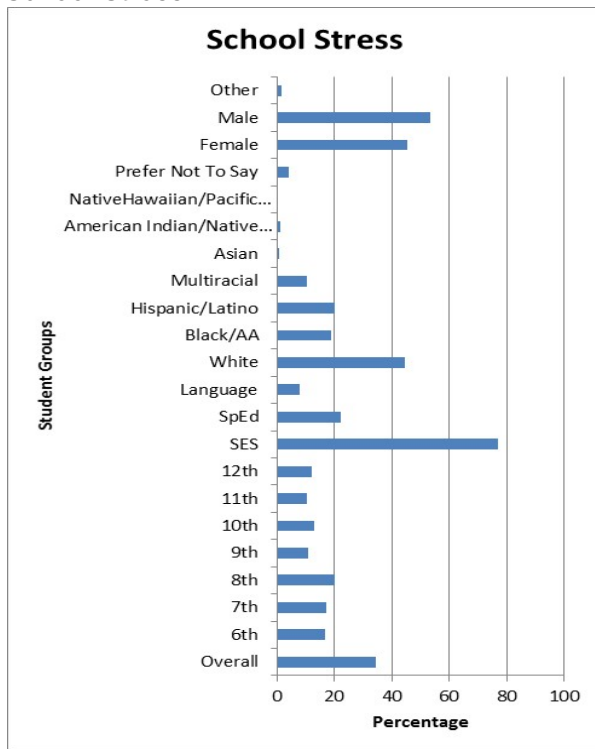
School Stress

School Stress reasons were endorsed by 34.6% of students overall. Items in the School Stress category measured the perception of the level of difficulty in school work, lack of preparedness for a class, and avoidance of a teacher or class.

Within grade levels, 8th grade students reported missing school for school stress related reasons to a slightly greater extent than did students from other grade-levels. Among student subgroups, students who identify as Hispanic/Latino or White, those who receive special education, and those who qualify for free or reduced price lunch reported missing school due to school stress most often.

Figure 5

School Stress



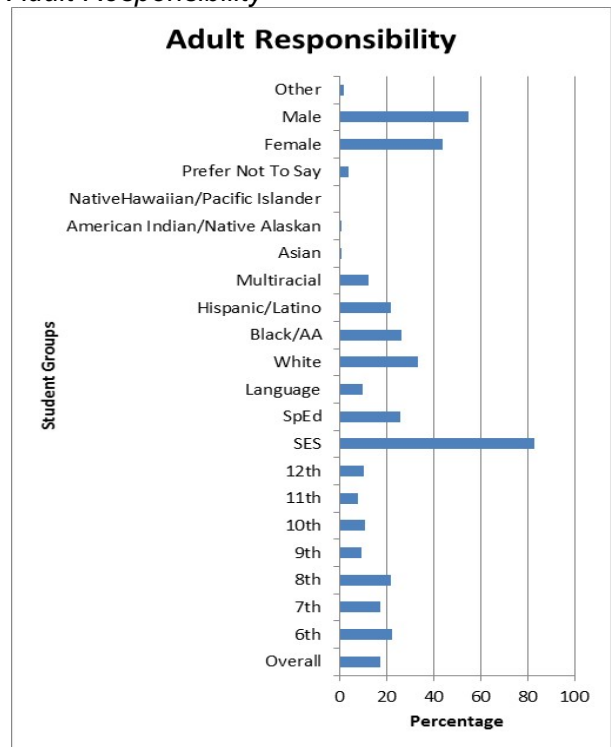
Adult Responsibilities

Adult Responsibilities were reported as “sometimes” or “usually” the reasons for missing school by 17.3% of the chronically absent students. Adult Responsibilities included items that measured having to work, care for another family member, or help a family member.

Within grade levels, 6th and 8th grade students reported missing school for adult responsibility related reasons to a slightly greater extent than did students from other grade-levels. Among student subgroups, students who identify as Male, Hispanic/Latino, Black/African American, or White; those who receive special education; and those who qualify for free or reduced price lunch reported missing school due to adult responsibilities most often.

Figure 6

Adult Responsibility



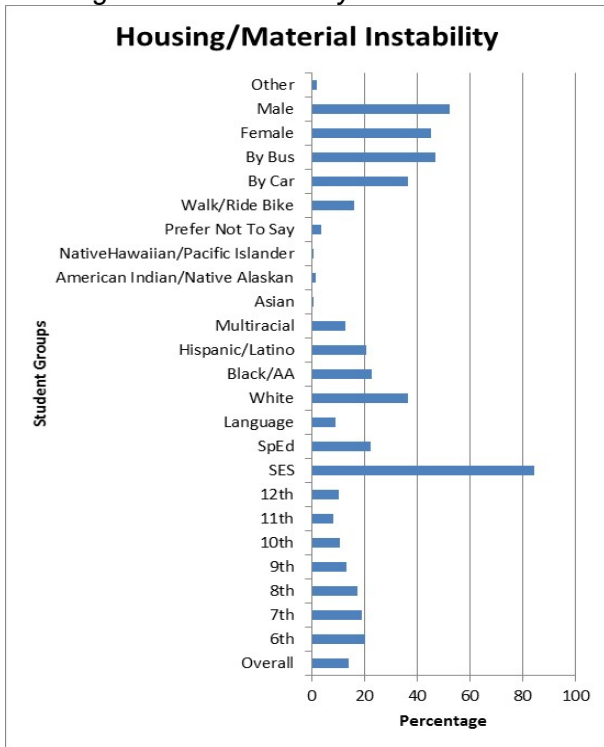
Housing/Material Instability

Housing/Material Instability was reported as “sometimes” or “usually” the reasons for missing school by 14.1% of the chronically absent students. Housing/Material Instability included items that measured lack of clean or appropriate clothing or materials for school, mobility, lack of housing or household utilities.

Within grade levels, 6th, 7th, and 8th grade students reported missing school for housing/material instability related reasons to a slightly greater extent than did students from other grade-levels. Among student subgroups, students who identify as Hispanic/Latino, Black/African American, or White; those who receive special education; and those who qualify for free or reduced price lunch reported missing school due to housing/material instability most often.

Figure 7

Housing/Material Instability



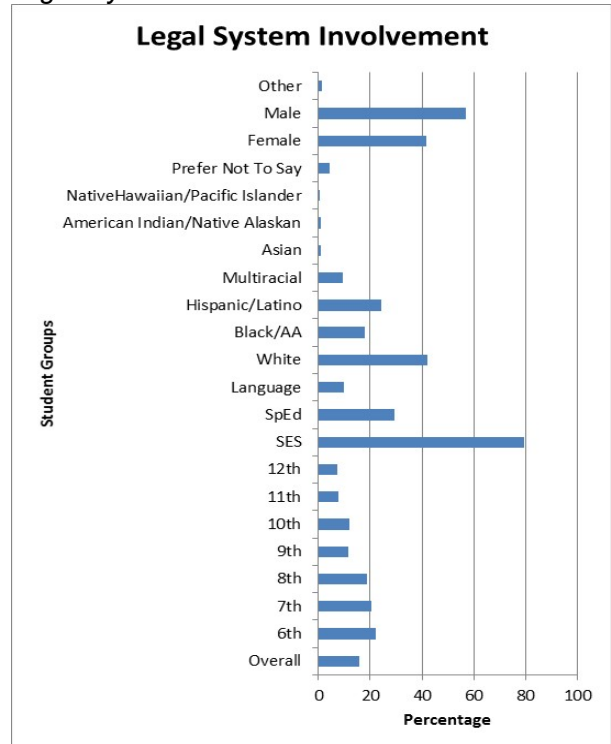
Legal System Involvement

Legal System Involvement reasons were endorsed by 15.6% of students overall. Items in the Legal System Involvement category measured incarceration (juvenile or adult facilities) and missing school due to court attendance.

Within grade levels, 6th, 7th, and 8th grade students reported missing school for legal system involvement related reasons to a slightly greater extent than did students from other grade-levels. Among student subgroups, students who identify as Male, those who identify as Hispanic/Latino or White, those who receive special education, and those who qualify for free or reduced price lunch reported missing school due to legal system involvement most often.

Figure 8

Legal System Involvement



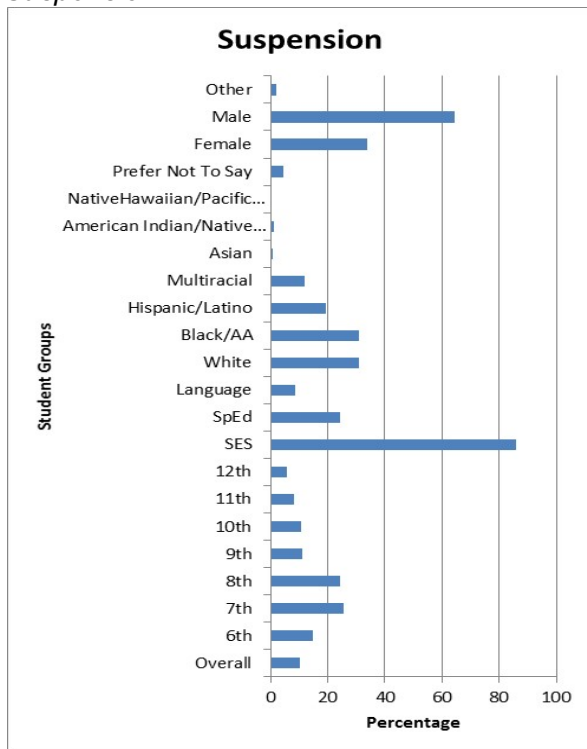
Suspension

Suspensions were reported by 10.4% of the chronically absent students to be the reasons they missed school “sometimes” or “usually.” One item made up this category (student absences due to suspensions).

Within grade levels, 7th and 8th grade students reported missing school due to suspension to a slightly greater extent than did students from other grade-levels. Among student subgroups, students who identify as Male, those who identify as Black/African American or White, those who receive special education, and those who qualify for free or reduced price lunch reported missing school due to suspensions most often.

Figure 9

Suspension



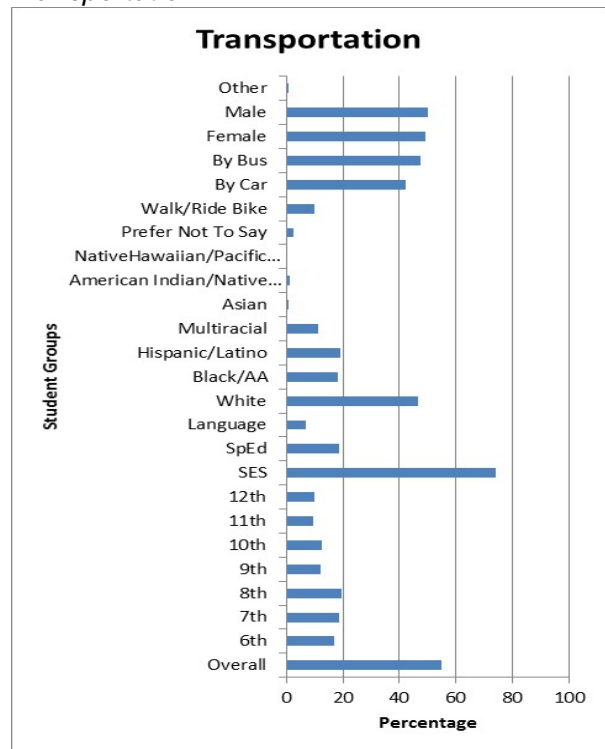
Transportation

Transportation reasons were endorsed by 54.8% of students overall. Items in the Transportation category measured car problems, bus problems (late, missed, did not come), not wanting to walk in bad weather, or being out of town.

Within grade levels, 6th, 7th, and 8th grade students reported missing school for transportation reasons to a slightly greater extent than did students from other grade-levels. Among student subgroups, students who arrive to school by bus, those who identify as White, and those who qualify for free or reduced price lunch, reported missing school due to transportation most often.

Figure 10

Transportation



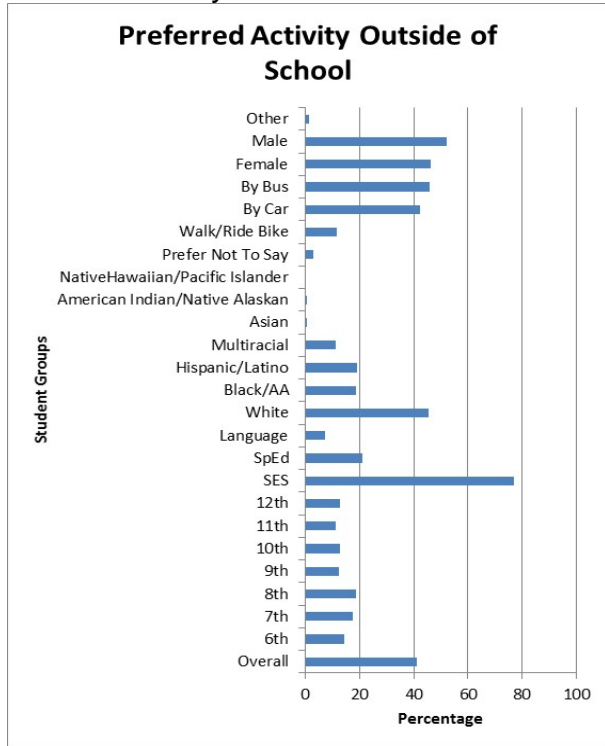
Preferred Activity Outside of School

Preferred Activity Outside of School was reported as “sometimes” or “usually” the reason for missing school by 41.1% of the chronically absent students. Preferred Activity Outside of School included items that measured hanging out with family/friends instead of attending school, staying up too late to get up for school, oversleeping, and substance use.

Within grade levels, 7th and 8th grade students reported missing school for preferred activity outside of school reasons to a slightly greater extent than did students from other grade-levels. Among student subgroups, students who identify as White, those who receive special education, and those who qualify for free or reduced price lunch reported missing school due to preferred activity outside of school most often.

Figure 11

Preferred Activity Outside of School



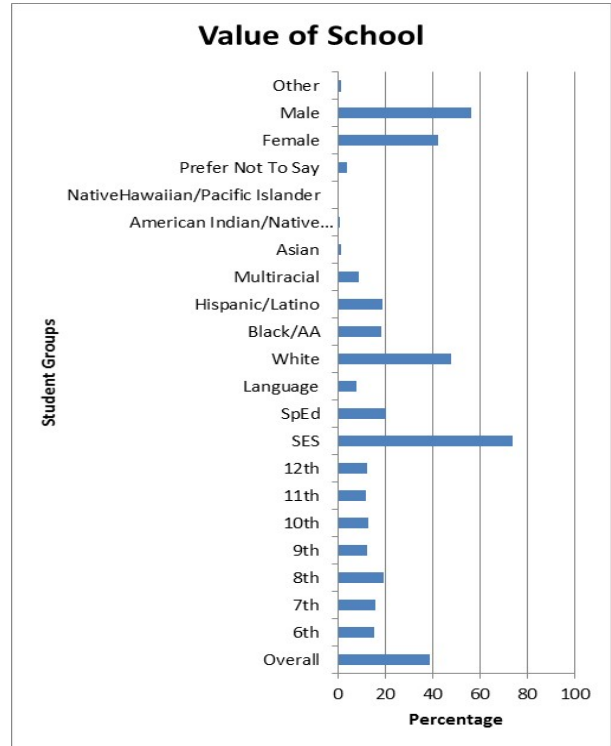
Value of School

Value of School was reported as “sometimes” or “usually” the reasons for missing school by 38.9% of the chronically absent students. Value of School included items that measured student perceptions that school is boring, their parents don’t care if they miss school, school will not help them reach future goals, and a general belief that there is no reason to attend school.

Within grade levels, 8th grade students reported missing school more often for value of school reasons than did students from other grade-levels. Among student subgroups, students who identify as Male, those who identify as White, those who receive special education, and those who qualify for free or reduced price lunch reported missing school due to value of school most often.

Figure 12

Value of School



Summary of Findings

This report includes data on reasons for chronic absenteeism provided by over 4,500 chronically absent students in Florida. Below is a summary of the major findings from the survey followed by questions for state-level stakeholders to consider. Specifically, questions regarding the state's role in supporting districts and schools to address students' perceptions of chronic absenteeism and to address barriers to students attending school consistently are provided.

One of the most basic strategies to begin to address concerning behaviors is to build general awareness of the behavior and the extent to which it deviates from standard levels of acceptability. Based on the responses to the items measuring perceptions of absences, it appears that students may be largely unaware of their own rate of absenteeism over time and misperceive what typical or acceptable rates of absenteeism are among secondary students.

Question: What is the state's role in supporting districts and schools in...

- ...consistently defining day of schooling?*
- ...consistently defining an absence?*
- ...consistently defining chronic absenteeism?*
- ...building awareness of absenteeism rates among students?*
- ...building awareness or correcting misperceptions of what constitutes typical or acceptable rates of absenteeism among students?*

The top reported reasons for chronic absenteeism among students were related to **health** (short-term illness, chronic illness, medical/dental/mental health appointments), **transportation** (missing the bus, car problems, not wanting to walk in bad weather, being out-of-town), **personal stress** (depression/sadness, stressed/upset, family emergencies), **preferred activity outside of school** (hung-out with family/friends, stayed-up too late/overslept, substance use), and **value of school** (perceptions that school is boring, no reason to come to school, belief that school will not help reach future goals, perception that parents don't care if absent from school).

The students provided ideas for supports to improve attendance that included **decreased level of difficulty/strictness** (less homework, more fair/consistent rules, more lenient dress codes), **engaging environments** (more interesting/fun/relevant/hands-on classes or instruction), **illness prevention** (not getting sick), **improved climate/relationships** (nicer peers or adults, less "drama", less bullying, and **academic support** (tutoring, better instruction, additional help from teachers).

Question: What is the state's role in supporting districts/school in...

- ...focusing on evidence-based practices for physical and mental health promotion and wellness?*
- ...developing systems for alternative methods to get students to school when their primary transportation mode is not an option (missed bus, car problems, etc.)?*
- ...engaging with family and community partners to facilitate access to services?*
- ...designing instruction through various means (Lesson Study, Universal Design for Learning, etc) that is meaningful, engaging and relevant for all students?*
- ...developing multi-tiered systems of support to address the academic and behavioral needs of all students?*