

### Actions to Improve Oversight of Key Federal Programs and Address High Chronic Absenteeism

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A report to congressional committees

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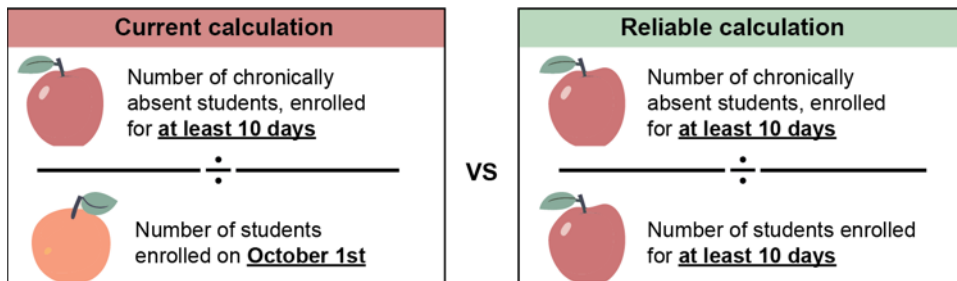
#### What GAO Found

All states that receive funding under Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, as amended (ESEA) are required to develop statewide accountability systems. Thirty-six states have chosen to include indicators related to chronic absenteeism in their statewide accountability systems. ESEA also has certain chronic absenteeism reporting requirements for all states, regardless of whether a state includes chronic absenteeism in its accountability system.

In 2026, the Department of Education discontinued its most comprehensive monitoring of ESEA's programmatic and fiscal requirements. The ESEA provision intended to improve oversight of funds does not explicitly direct Education to monitor grantees, nor does it include specific requirements regarding the method or frequency of monitoring and oversight activities. Suspending its most comprehensive monitoring has broad oversight implications that extend beyond chronic absenteeism. Given that Education is not currently assessing ESEA compliance with Title I fiscal requirements, there is higher risk that these federal funds—comprising about two-thirds of the nearly \$27 billion in ESEA funding in 2025—could be subject to undetected fraud, waste, or abuse.

While Education requires states to report data on chronically absent students using a standard method, the way Education uses those data to calculate chronic absenteeism rates can be unreliable. For example, Education directs states to report the number of chronically absent students over a school year, but to report total enrollment based on a single date. Calculating rates using mismatched timeframes has resulted in unreliable and implausible chronic absenteeism rates (e.g., rates over 100 percent), according to GAO's analysis. GAO calculated rates at the school level and found this was especially true in low-performing schools where enrollment fluctuates more often, and shared-time schools which students attend for partial days, such as those housing career and technical education programs. Specifically, over 30 percent of these schools had implausible rates compared to under 2 percent for other schools.

#### Methods of Calculating the Chronic Absenteeism Rates



Source: GAO analysis of ED Facts information. GAO (icons). | GAO-26-107920

Missing school means missing valuable instructional time and poses serious implications for students' overall academic success and wellbeing. Absent quality chronic absenteeism data, this nationwide data source cannot be used to reliably track trends or evaluate the effectiveness of accountability efforts and interventions to address chronic absenteeism.

#### Why GAO Did This Study

Chronic absenteeism, which Education defines as missing 10 percent or more school days, is associated with decreased academic performance. As recently as February 2026, Education cited chronic absenteeism as a key challenge. Education has also noted that chronic absenteeism remains elevated following the COVID-19 pandemic. At least one-quarter of K-12 students were estimated to be chronically absent in recent years.

GAO was asked to examine federal oversight related to chronic absenteeism. This report examines (1) how states have incorporated chronic absenteeism into their statewide accountability systems and the extent to which Education's monitoring addresses relevant federal requirements and (2) the extent to which Education has leveraged its data to help address chronic absenteeism.

GAO reviewed relevant federal laws and analyzed Education's guidance and relevant monitoring reports since 2019, when Education fully implemented its main ESEA monitoring strategy. GAO also analyzed Education's school year 2022–2023 chronic absenteeism data (the most recent available).

#### What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends that Congress consider clearly articulating ESEA monitoring requirements to ensure compliance and deter waste, fraud, and abuse. GAO is also making three recommendations, including that Education resume more comprehensive ESEA monitoring and improve the reliability of chronic absenteeism data. Education agreed with one of the recommendations and disagreed with two. GAO continues to believe these actions are necessary, as discussed in the report.