

GUIDANCE DOCUMENT

# Chronic Absenteeism



IDAHO DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION  
ASSESSMENT & ACCOUNTABILITY

650 W STATE STREET, 2ND FLOOR  
BOISE, IDAHO 83702  
208 332 6800 OFFICE / 711 TRS  
[WWW.SDE.IDAHO.GOV](http://WWW.SDE.IDAHO.GOV)

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## INTRODUCTION

Chronic absenteeism has emerged as a significant challenge in the U.S. education system, particularly in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. During the 2021–2022 school year, approximately 31% of students nationwide were chronically absent, a figure that slightly decreased to 28% in 2022–2023. The Idaho Department of Education has identified the need for concerted efforts to improve student attendance.

Regular school attendance is crucial for academic success and overall well-being. Students who are chronically absent miss valuable instructional time, which can hinder their ability to read at grade level by third grade and increase the risk of not graduating from high school. To learn more about the current state of chronic absenteeism in the United States, visit [this resource](#) from the U.S. Department of Education.

A critical first step in addressing chronic absenteeism is ensuring that our data accurately reflects attendance patterns in our schools. This requires a clear understanding of key definitions, transparency in how chronic absenteeism is calculated, and implementation of effective policies and practices. This guidance document offers a foundation for improving the accuracy of Idaho’s chronic absenteeism data.

## DEFINITIONS

### Student Absence

According to the [U.S. Department of Education](#), a student is considered absent if “he or she was not physically on school grounds and was not participating in instruction or instruction-related activities at an approved off-grounds location for at least half the school day.”

- This definition applies regardless of the reason for the absence, encompassing excused absences, unexcused absences, and suspensions.
- If a student attends exactly half of the school day, they are still marked as absent for that day.
- When determining chronic absenteeism, absences are calculated based on the time a student is scheduled to be in class, rather than the overall length of the school day. For example, if a student is scheduled for 4 out of 8 class periods, they would be considered absent if they miss at least half of those 4 periods.

**Note:** This definition of student absence applies specifically to chronic absenteeism and should not be used in relation to average daily attendance or other measures.

## Chronic Absenteeism

Students are considered chronically absent if they meet the following criteria:

- They have been enrolled in the school for at least 10 school days at any point during the academic year.
- They have been absent for 10% or more of their enrolled school days, as determined by the U.S. Department of Education's definition of "student absence."

## COMPONENTS OF CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM CALCULATION

### Chronic Absenteeism Rate Calculation

The chronic absenteeism rate represents the percentage of students at a school or local education agency (LEA) who were chronically absent during the school year. This rate is calculated at the end of the school year using the following formula:

$\frac{\text{Number of students who are chronically absent}}{\text{Total number of students enrolled as of May 2, 2025}}$
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**Note:** This rate is calculated using the spring enrollment count, which is the number of students enrolled on the first Friday in May (per the [Assessment and Accountability Business Rules](#)).

The Idaho Department of Education calculates the chronic absenteeism rate using data submitted through the Idaho System for Educational Excellence (ISEE). LEAs use attendance data from their School Information System (SIS) to identify and report students as "Chronically Absent" in ISEE. Once designated, these students receive a Chronic Absenteeism flag on their record, which contributes to the numerator in the rate calculation.

### Student Information System (SIS)

The Idaho State Board of Education provides standardized definitions of student absence and chronic absenteeism to all SIS vendors partnering with Idaho public schools. Vendors use these definitions to establish rules for calculating chronic absenteeism within the SIS. While LEAs

cannot modify or influence these calculation rules, they play a crucial role in ensuring the accuracy of the attendance and enrollment data used in the process.

## Student Enrollment

Student Information Systems (SIS) calculate chronic absenteeism based on the school calendar and course schedules provided by the LEA. Errors in these records can lead to inaccurate absenteeism calculations. To ensure accuracy, LEAs should regularly review and verify the school calendar, bell schedule, and student course enrollments in the SIS before and throughout the school year.

## Attendance

Attendance should be recorded accurately, reviewed daily, and audited weekly by building personnel to ensure precise reporting and proper chronic absenteeism calculations. When tracking attendance, keep in mind that most systems default to marking a student as present unless an absence is recorded. Additionally, if your school or LEA has a policy that limits the number of absences a student can have—especially in relation to earning credit toward graduation—consider whether the allowed number exceeds 10% of the total school days.

### In-Person Schools

According to the [Attendance and Enrollment Manual](#), the Idaho Department of Education recommends that in-person elementary schools record attendance twice daily (morning and afternoon), while middle, junior high, and high schools take attendance during each class period. Students may still be considered present if they participate in curriculum-based field trips or engage in extended learning opportunities ([Idaho Code 33-6401](#)) under the supervision of a teacher ([IDAPA 08.02.01.250.03](#)).

### Online, Virtual, and Remote Learning Programs

For online, virtual, and remote learning programs, attendance is measured by the amount of instruction received rather than physical seat time; however, it is still reported in full or half-day increments. As a result, LEAs operating these programs must establish a method for converting student activity into daily attendance and document their methodology through clear policies and procedures.

Additionally, LEAs should avoid designating all students in these programs as self-directed learners, as this can lead to inaccurate attendance reporting. The "self-directed learner" designation applies only to students who meet specific criteria outlined in [Idaho Code 33-512D](#) and is not automatically granted to all students in online, virtual, or remote learning environments.

## SELF-DIRECTED LEARNERS

According to [Idaho Code 33-512D](#), a self-directed learner is a full-time student who demonstrates mastery of content knowledge and has made an informed choice regarding their postsecondary career and education goals. Self-directed learners are designated by their teacher(s) and are granted the flexibility to tailor their learning experience, which may include flexible attendance, virtual schooling, extended learning opportunities, and more. To maintain their status as a self-directed learner, students must continue to meet criteria such as demonstrating ongoing mastery of content, showing academic growth, making progress toward postsecondary goals, or meeting other measures of student learning.

### Reporting Students as Self-Directed Learners

Students who are self-directed learners are reported in the Student Demographics file submitted through ISEE. If a student is a self-directed learner at any point during the school year, mark "Yes" in the selfDirectedLearner field. Once a student is designated as a self-directed learner, they are considered enrolled as 1.0 FTE (full-time equivalent), meaning they are counted as being in attendance for a full school day when calculating support units and public school funding.

### Taking Attendance for Self-Directed Learners

The federal definition of "student absence" does not take the reason for the absence into account, meaning that a self-directed learner designation does not exempt a student from being marked as absent. Record the student's actual attendance, marking the selfDirLearn field as "Yes" for the day. This ensures an accurate attendance record without negatively impacting funding, as ISEE will override the attendance data for funding purposes, ensuring the LEA receives full funding for these students. However, any absences will still contribute to the total number of absences and could lead to a student being classified as chronically absent if their absences reach 10% or more of their total enrolled days.

## CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM REPORTING

### End-of-Year Reporting (State and Federal)

The Idaho Department of Education only requires students' chronic absenteeism data to be reported via ISEE once they have exited the school. This field is blank during the school year, and it is only filled in when (1) a student unenrolls or (2) the school year ends. The Department

collects LEAs' and schools' end-of-year chronic absenteeism data annually to meet federal reporting requirements. This data is reported as a chronic absenteeism rate (percentage) at the state, LEA, and school levels. The final rate is calculated at the end of each school year after all students have been exited.

### Mid-Year Reporting (LEAs and Schools)

ISEE does not currently support mid-year reporting for chronic absenteeism. However, many SIS vendors offer tools that can help you track chronic absenteeism during the school year. Contact your LEA's SIS vendor to learn how to generate this type of report. If the feature isn't available, ask whether it can be added. Keep in mind that the accuracy of chronic absenteeism data improves over time, since the total number of school days (used as the denominator) increases as the year goes on.