

The weaponization of student absenteeism: Lies to justify school privatization under Trump

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“Chronic absenteeism” has become a catchphrase on the lips of politicians and think tanks purportedly describing the “failure” of the US public education system. The high rates of student absences from school are being weaponized to justify the Wall Street’s demand for the privatization of public education, a top priority of the incoming Trump administration and its nominee for Education Secretary, Linda McMahon.

Millions of children are, indeed, missing from school and tragically losing out on education. Chronic absenteeism is typically defined as missing 10 percent of the school year (about 3.5 weeks). American schools have 160-180 days of instruction per year.

The loss of education and opportunity amount to a social and cultural crime. In 2023-24, approximately 9.4 million American students were chronically absent out of a school population of 50 million. This problem, however, has many causes—all tied to the breakdown of the capitalist system—including the enormous growth of poverty, the refusal of capitalist governments to “follow the science” and enact the necessary measures to eliminate COVID-19, the collapse of the public health system and the escalating social crisis across the US.

The statistics on chronic absenteeism speak to a widespread social breakdown overseen by both Democrats and Republicans. The highest rate of chronic absenteeism is in Alaska, with nearly half, 48.6 percent, of all students missing more than 10 percent of the school year. Washington D.C. is close behind, with 43 percent chronically absent in the 2022-23 school year. A staggering 60 percent of D.C.’s high school students were chronically absent, with worse attendance records in the poorest neighborhoods. For example, 89.3 percent were chronically absent at Ballou High in Ward 8, according to the DC School Report Card.

The right wing has systematically laid blame for the crisis—and attendant dropout rates—on the existence of public education. The Heritage Foundation, which authored *Project 2025*, insists, “Students won’t consistently show up for school until we have school models tailored to the needs of every family.” Championing this program of “school choice,” Education Savings Accounts and other privatization policies, the American Enterprise Institute made chronic absenteeism its “top priority” at last summer’s conference.

Democrats’ role in the assault on public education

The Democrats, both nationally and within Democratic-controlled school districts, have fueled the crisis by decades of bipartisan budget cuts, which typically result in the elimination of those programs deemed “non-core.” In other words, at risk are those classes that may offer young

people a fun and creative outlet—photography, choir, swimming, etc.—and keep those who may struggle academically engaged and challenged.

With districts already losing funding for the arts, field trips and other enrichments, sports opportunities, libraries and innumerable other aspects of high-quality education, this year the Biden administration oversaw the termination of Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund (ESSER) financing.

The ending of ESSER is predicted to cost 384,000 full-time educators their jobs and is already causing widespread program cancellations and school closings. Specifically, the loss of ESSER funding will lead to the shutdown of highly effective tutoring programs and eliminate thousands of school support staff, including school nurses.

Politicians from both big business parties also routinely cover up their reactionary attacks on funding by insinuating that young people are self-sabotaging or that parents do not care enough to insist their children attend school. What a lie! The fact is that schools are increasingly degraded, characterized by endless rounds of standardized tests and harsh disciplinary measures, while operating with bare-bones budgets.

How could young people possibly remain motivated under these uninspiring and abject conditions?

By contrast, in the 1960s, when the American bourgeoisie dominated world finance and sought to compete with the USSR, schools were far better funded and the conditions entirely different. And chronic absenteeism was largely unheard of except in rare cases of severe disease.

It may come as a surprise to young people today that during that period and until well into the 1990s in many districts, musical instruments were handed out for free by third grade, elementary schools had orchestras, there were free in-school one-on-one music instruction, and free extra-curricular classes were available in other arts, such as drawing, sculpture, etc. Field trips to museums, as well as cities across the US, were regular occurrences. There was no need to bring in boxes of tissues, paper or other materials to classrooms or imposing yearly fundraising activities on students and their families.

But while depriving schools of vitally necessary resources and prioritizing spending for war, the Democrats have called for an “all-hands-on-deck approach” to address absenteeism, as memorialized in a September 2023 White House briefing. A central aspect of this policy is to punish students and parents. Vice President and former Democratic candidate for US President Kamala Harris is notorious for her creation of a Chronic Truancy Law when she served as California’s Attorney General in 2011. Under the measure, parents were fined up to \$2,000, and some were arrested for “allowing” their children to be “chronically truant.”

As of 2024, 24 states and the District of Columbia treat truancy as a crime. In Nashville, Tennessee, for example, students can be referred to services after only four unexcused absences. The first intervention

involves the school staff and meetings between counselors and parents. However, if attendance does not improve, the school principal can refer the family to juvenile court.

In November, the Democratic Party-controlled Detroit Public Schools (DPS) announced new punitive attendance policies following the recent termination of hundreds of educators. Kindergarten through Grade 8 students who miss 45 or more days would likely be held back for an entire year, while high school students missing 23 days of a course would be failed.

In Michigan, 29.5 percent of students were chronically absent during the 2023-24 school year. Under state law, Michigan rescinds a cash benefit from hundreds of poor families because their children do not attend school regularly enough. Thousands more families who apply for the benefit are rejected because of their attendance records.

Punitive policies have been reproduced throughout the country as more states target absenteeism. *Education Week* reported that Texan students aged 12 and older were sent to truancy court for unexcused absences. They faced fines of up to \$100, “the suspension of their driver’s license, or a referral to the juvenile court system.” Parents were fined as much as \$500.

Last July, Indiana put into effect the Senate Enrolled Act 282, which requires that schools refer elementary students having 10 or more unexcused absences to the county prosecutor.

Why has chronic absenteeism grown?

There are multiple causes underlying the growth of chronic absenteeism. First of all, children are missing school because they are sick, most often with COVID-19.

Trump and the Republicans endlessly repeat the false claim that temporary anti-COVID lockdowns, which in all but one state (New Mexico) lasted no more than three months, somehow created the crisis of chronic absenteeism. It is just the opposite: It was the criminal refusal of the Trump and Biden administrations to implement the necessary public health measures to protect the population from COVID-19 and spearhead an internationally-coordinated policy to eliminate the virus that caused the massive and continuing COVID-19 crisis. The persistence of high numbers of children not attending school has been one of the outcomes of this monumental social crime.

In 2019, about 15 percent of schoolchildren were chronically absent. In the depths of the COVID-19 pandemic, as thousands of parents, grandparents and other family members were sickened and dying of COVID-19, chronic absenteeism leapt to 28 percent nationally. These numbers declined slightly to 26 percent in 2022-23 and fell to 19 percent in 2023-24, still affecting about 9.4 million students.

The ruling elites have a vested interest in linking absenteeism to the COVID-19 lockdowns. The lesson drawn by big business from the lockdowns, which impinged on their profits, is that they should never be permitted again, no matter how many people die from future pandemics. Hence, the concerted campaign to blame school shutdowns for the trauma and learning loss which were, in reality, caused by the “let it rip” policies of Trump and Biden towards COVID-19.

This anti-lockdown policy of “herd immunity,” adopted by both Trump and Biden, cost of lives of thousands of schoolchildren and over 1.5 million Americans and counting. At least 300,000 children lost caregivers. In what amounted to a grotesque lab experiment on an entire generation, repeated bouts of COVID-19 are causing ever-broadening rates of Long COVID, with potentially lifelong disabilities, including neurological damages, which may not be understood for decades.

As a direct and indirect result of the mass deaths, disability and social dislocation of COVID-19, alongside government indifference and prioritization of US wars across the globe, young people are experiencing an unprecedented mental health crisis and greater social alienation.

Underscoring the Biden administration’s complicity in keeping kids in schools and parents on the job, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) has now said that those who are actively infectious with COVID-19 could return to schools or workplaces. The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) followed with new guidelines allowing school attendance for those with “mild” diarrhea and vomiting. This is a recipe for more disease and death and amounts to the repudiation of public health.

Other illnesses are also on the rise for a variety of reasons stemming from pollution and climate change—also the product of the insatiable drive for capitalist profit-making. For example, asthma has doubled since 1980, especially in urban areas.

Secondly, more children are missing school because of growing poverty. Unreliable transportation, hunger, a lack of clothing, and limited necessary school supplies, including internet access—all cause children to miss school.

Worst of all, the spread of deep poverty means the rise of homelessness. Since the 2006-2007 school year, student homelessness is up 77 percent. In the 2021-2022 school year, nearly 1.2 million children were homeless. In New York City alone, the number of students experiencing homelessness grew to more than 146,000 last school year, an increase of 26,000 students, according to a recent report.

Students experiencing homelessness are chronically absent from school at a rate at least twice that of the overall student population. The nonprofit SchoolHouse Connection explains, “The mobility, poverty, and trauma associated with homelessness affects students’ emotional and physical health, hygiene, preparedness for school, transportation options, and other factors that increase absenteeism.”

Ed Research, created by the Annenberg Institute at Brown University, concludes, “Students who walk through dangerous neighborhoods to get to school or who have long commutes to school have lower attendance rates. Districts located in cities with higher rates of asthma and colder weather have a higher percentage of chronically absent students. Poor classroom ventilation is associated with increased absences due to illness.” And they add, “Students living in neighborhoods with higher poverty levels, lower homeownership rates, and more violent crimes have more absences.”

Seizing on absenteeism for a right-wing political agenda

Chronic absentee numbers make no allowance for these massive social problems. In fact, the statistic even fails to distinguish between “excused” and “unexcused” absences. Therefore, as noted above, the CDC guidelines call for sick children to be in school.

Chronic absenteeism as a metric first came into wide use to meet the requirements of former Democratic President Obama’s 2015 Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). ESSA continued its predecessor’s (Race to the Top) emphasis on standardized test scores and added state accountability criteria, often measured by attendance rates. ESSA mandated the labeling of “failing schools” and victimized those that served impoverished children in order to promote charters and other privatization measures. The first year measured specifically for chronic absenteeism, 2015, already showed 7 million students missing 10 percent or more of the school year.

Now, the mantra of addressing “learning loss from lockdowns” has

become the political justification for school privatization and the total subordination of education to profit interests. Only a solution that addresses the root cause of social distress and poverty can create the conditions to adequately inspire and educate the next generation. The trillions currently squandered on war and the stock portfolios of the billionaires must be redirected to the social needs of mankind. This requires the ending of capitalism and the establishment of socialism.



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