

Addressing Chronic Absenteeism is Critical to Addressing Attrition of Texas Students

**IDRA Written Testimony for SB 991, submitted by Paige Duggins-Clay, J.D., to the
Senate Committee on Education K-16, March 25, 2025**

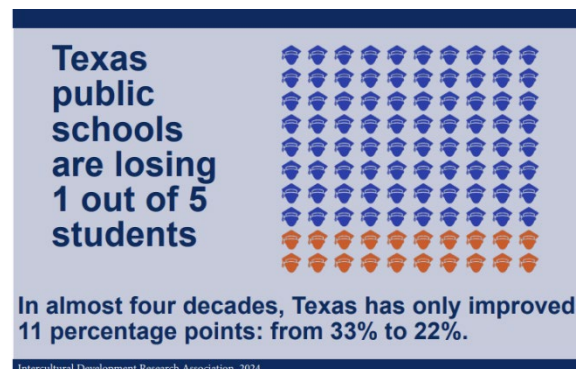
Dear Chair Creighton and Honorable Members of the Committee:

My name is Paige Duggins-Clay, J.D. I am the Chief Legal Analyst at IDRA, an independent, non-partisan non-profit committed to achieving equal educational opportunity for every child through strong public schools that prepare all students to access and succeed in college.

IDRA respectfully submits these joint comments in support of Senate Bill 991. IDRA supports SB 991 because it builds on the legislature's recent positive efforts to address the unprecedented challenges of chronic absenteeism among Texas students in the wake of a global pandemic. We would like to thank Sen. Middleton for partnering with Rep. Buckley in the last session to sponsor and secure passage of House Bill 3917 (88R), which encouraged family-school partnerships to address root causes of truancy and directed the Texas Education Agency (TEA) to provide guidance for schools seeking to support students and families in addressing chronic absenteeism (IDRA et al., 2023).

For nearly 40 years, IDRA has conducted an annual attrition study with the same methodology, making year-to-year comparisons possible. Our most recent report, released in the fall of 2024, revealed a staggering reality: Texas is failing to graduate one out of every five students.

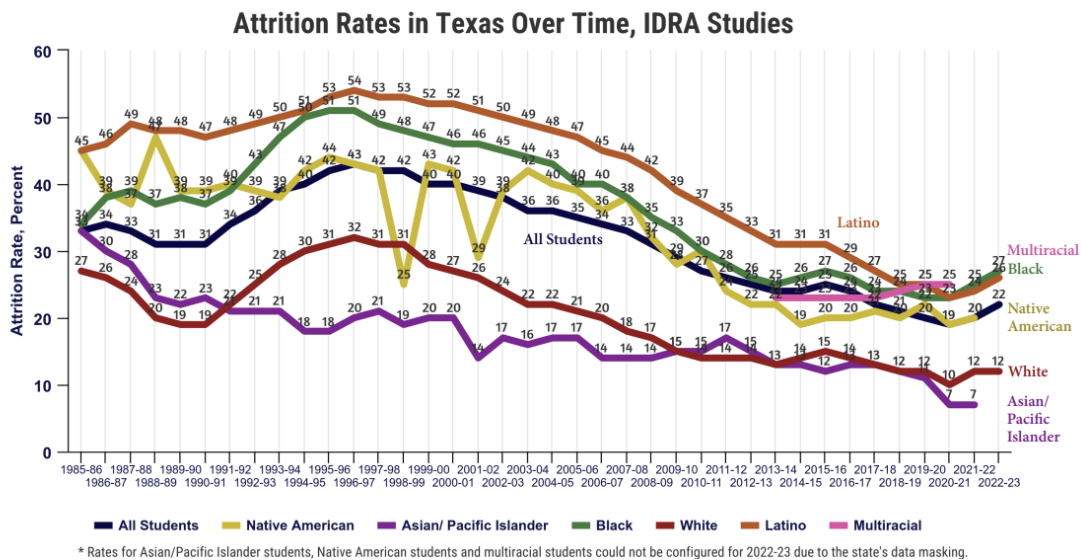
Specifically, 22% of the freshman class of 2019-20 left school prior to graduating with a high school diploma. To put that in context, Texas public high schools lost a total of 96,864 students from the 2019-20 freshman class.



Notably, 2022-23 was the first school year in nearly three decades to reverse the trend of steady decline of student attrition in Texas schools. This underscores the significant and unprecedented role that the 2019 COVID-19 pandemic contributed to the recent increase in chronic absenteeism rates (Quintanilla-Muñoz & Sánchez, 2024).

Concerningly, the impact of this issue dramatically affects some students more than others. For example, the attrition rates for Black students (27%) and Latino students (26%) worsened since the previous year, while the rates for white students stayed the same (12%). In other words, schools are twice as likely to lose Latino and Black students than their white peers before they graduate.

Longitudinal Attrition Rates by Race-Ethnicity in Texas Public Schools, 1985-86 to 2022-23



The reasons for chronic absenteeism – and, ultimately, high dropout rates – are as diverse as our Texas students and the challenges they face. Ultimately, research has found that chronic absenteeism is most prevalent in economically disadvantaged and rural communities, for students with disabilities, for pregnant and parenting students, and for students and families of color (IDRA et al, 2023; OCR, 2019; Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012).

IDRA's research has specifically identified six policies and practices that lead to higher dropout rates: (1) exclusionary discipline, (2) in-grade retention, (3) low funding and insufficient support for emergent bilingual students, (4) unfair and insufficient school funding, (5) watered-down, non-college prep curricula, and (6) high-stakes testing (Quintanilla-Muñoz, 2022).

Addressing these issues through smart and research-based policy along with the robust data collection proposed in SB 991 is critical to addressing student absenteeism in Texas. While the available data on attrition offers important insights about school holding power for our most underserved students, collecting and assessing disaggregated data on the prevalence of chronic absenteeism is a necessary step to identify appropriate and effective strategies to get – and keep – all children in school.

Recommendations

The legislature must act to provide opportunities and resources for schools, families and communities to work together to create supportive environments that engage students in their education and address the systemic barriers that contribute to absenteeism. We urge this committee to pass SB 991.

We also recommend that the bill be amended to align with its nearly-identical House companion, HB 213, which includes a requirement that data collected under this legislation be disaggregated on the basis of several factors, including socioeconomic status, special education status, emergent bilingual status, and race/ethnicity.

We further encourage the committee to prioritize and pass additional legislation that addresses the root causes of chronic absenteeism, including by providing additional funding to our public schools to support the programs, personnel and services to support youth in at-risk situations. SB 570, requiring the creation of a uniform attendance policy for schools and strengthening school and family engagement, would help accomplish this goal.

Thank you for your consideration. IDRA and our partners are available for any questions or further resources that we can provide. For more information, please contact Paige Duggins-Clay, J.D., IDRA's chief legal analyst, at paige.duggins-clay@idra.org.

Resources

IDRA, Texas Appleseed, Texas Center for Justice and Equity, ACLU Texas, and National Association of Social Workers Texas. (April 10, 2023). HB 3917 Provides Positive Framework for Students, Families and Schools to Address Chronic Absenteeism Comments in Support of House Bill 3917, submitted to the Texas House Select Committee on Youth Health and Safety. <https://idra.news/TxTestimony-HB3917>

OCR. (2016). Chronic Absenteeism in the Nation's Schools: An Unprecedented Look at a Hidden Educational Crisis. U.S. Department of Education, Office for Civil Rights. <https://www2.ed.gov/datastory/chronicabsenteeism.html>

Quintanilla-Muñoz, C., & Sánchez, J. (June 2022). 2024 Pandemic-Legacy High School Attrition Rate Increases Two Points; Black-White Gap Widens to 15 Points. IDRA Texas Public School Attrition Study, 2022-23. <https://www.idra.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/Texas-Public-School-Attrition-Study-2022-23.pdf>

Quintanilla-Muñoz, C. (June 2022). How the Pandemic May Impact School Policies and Practices that Lead to Higher Dropout Rates IDRA Attrition Study 2020-21. Texas Public School Attrition Study 2020-21, pp 29-31. IDRA. <https://idra.news/Attrition21p>

IDRA is an independent, non-profit organization led by Celina Moreno, J.D. Our mission is to achieve equal educational opportunity for every child through strong public schools that prepare all students to access and succeed in college.