



# Getting Down to **FACTS**

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## Student Outcomes in California: Progress, Uneven Recovery, and Persistent Gaps

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## Introduction

How are California’s students doing? The question is straightforward, but the answers are complex. California serves a large and diverse student population, and student progress looks different across outcomes, age groups, and communities. As a starting point for understanding how the state’s students are doing, this brief highlights key findings from four Getting Down to Facts III technical reports that address student outcomes in math and reading achievement (Reardon), chronic absenteeism (Gee and Yu), high school course-taking (Kurlaender et al.), and childhood emotional distress (Fisher et al.).

These outcomes should be understood in the context of California’s large and high-need student population. In 2024–25, California enrolled about 5.8 million public school students, including just over 1 million English learners, according to the California Department of Education. CDE data also show that homeless youth made up approximately four percent of California students, while Kaler et al. report that students with disabilities accounted for about 15 percent of enrollment. This context matters because California’s achievement progress since 2003 has occurred while schools have been serving a student population with substantial and varied needs (California Department of Education, 2026a, 2026b, 2026c).

Across these outcomes, the evidence shows real progress alongside substantial unfinished work. California’s achievement in math and reading has improved relative to the nationwide average, chronic absenteeism rates have declined from their pandemic peak, and college preparatory coursetaking, including completion of the A-G requirements, has increased. At the same time, students still achieve slightly below the national average, progress in reducing chronic absenteeism has slowed, and course-taking opportunities remain highly variable across schools.

A central pattern cuts across all four reports: longstanding disparities by socioeconomic status, race and ethnicity, disability status, English learner status, housing status, and family income remain deeply embedded in California’s public education system. Some disparities have widened, particularly in math achievement and chronic absenteeism. The evidence points to progress that is meaningful, uneven, and incomplete, with student outcomes shaped by opportunities and supports that vary across the state.

## Key Findings

1

**California's achievement outcomes have improved relative to the nation, but students still score slightly below the national average.**

Since 2003, California's fourth- and eighth-graders have performed below the national public-school average on NAEP reading and mathematics. In 2011, California ranked near the bottom nationally on some NAEP measures, especially eighth-grade reading (National Center for Education Statistics, 2011). These gaps have substantially narrowed over time, and as of 2024, California's students are performing only slightly behind the national average in math and reading.

2

**Chronic absenteeism has declined from its pandemic peak, but recovery has slowed and rates remain far above pre-pandemic levels.**

Chronic absenteeism fell after reaching 30 percent in 2021-22, but the statewide rate remains nearly twice as high as before the pandemic. At the current pace, a return to pre-pandemic rates is unlikely before 2030.

3

**College and career preparatory coursetaking has expanded, but access remains uneven across schools and student groups.**

More than half of California public high school graduates completed A-G requirements or took at least one Advanced Placement (AP) course, and participation in advanced coursework is associated with higher college enrollment. Participation varies substantially across schools and demographic groups.

4

**Emotional distress among young children is widespread, with higher rates among families facing economic and caregiving pressures.**

In the RAPID California Voices Survey, an online survey of California parents and caregivers of children under age six conducted between November 2022 and December 2025, more than two out of three parents reported that their child had exhibited at least one emotional distress behavior during the previous month. Economic pressures that make it difficult for families to meet basic needs, such as housing, food, and child care, may be contributing to these rates.

5

**Disparities persist across achievement, attendance, coursetaking, and early childhood well-being.**

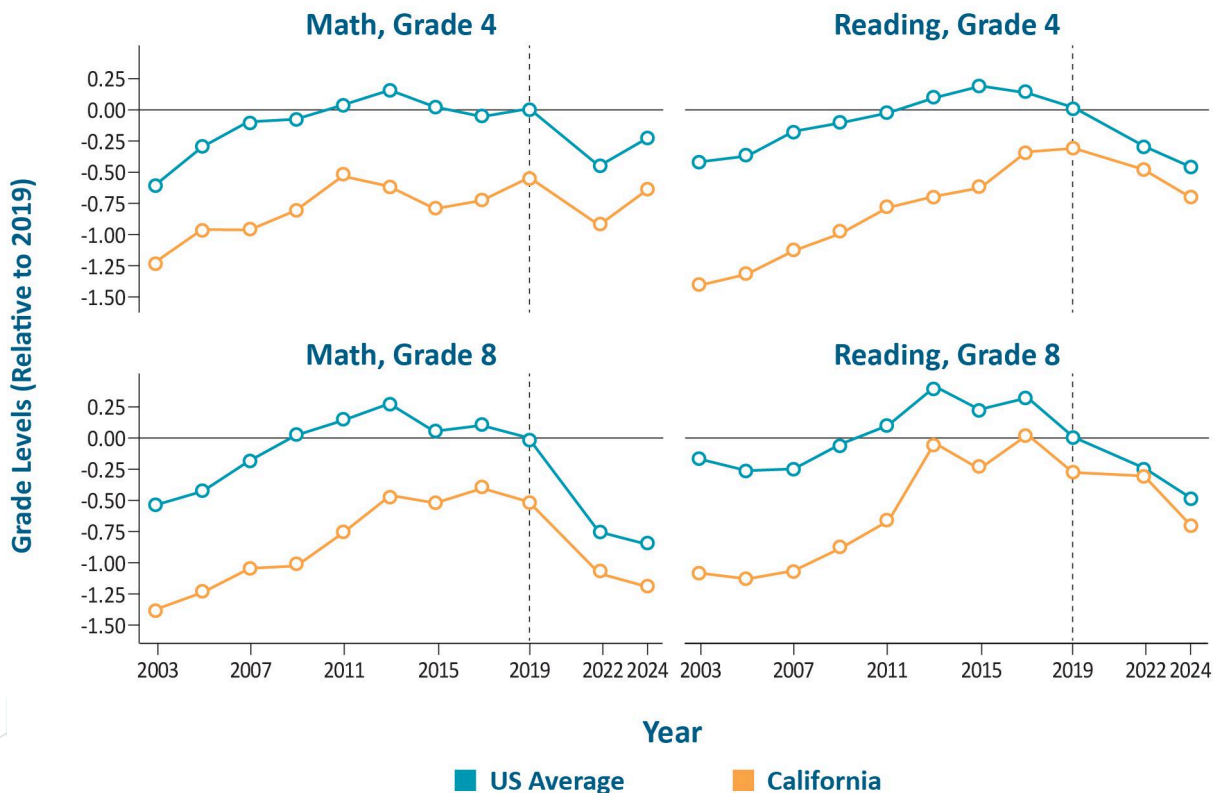
The gap in math performance between high- and low-SES students has widened. Chronic absence rates for disadvantaged student groups remain elevated relative to all students, while college and career readiness course enrollment rates for disadvantaged student groups are lower than rates for their peers. Lower-income families are more likely to report childhood emotional distress.

## The Evidence Behind These Findings

### California’s achievement outcomes have improved relative to the nation, but students still score slightly below the national average

Based on results from the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), math and reading scores among California’s fourth and eighth graders rose faster than the national average between 2003 and 2019, and declined less after 2019 (**Figure 1**). As of 2024, students’ academic skills are still slightly lower than the national average by 0.3 grade levels in math and 0.2 grade levels in reading.

**Figure 1. NAEP Trends, CA and US, by Subject and Grade, 2003-2024**

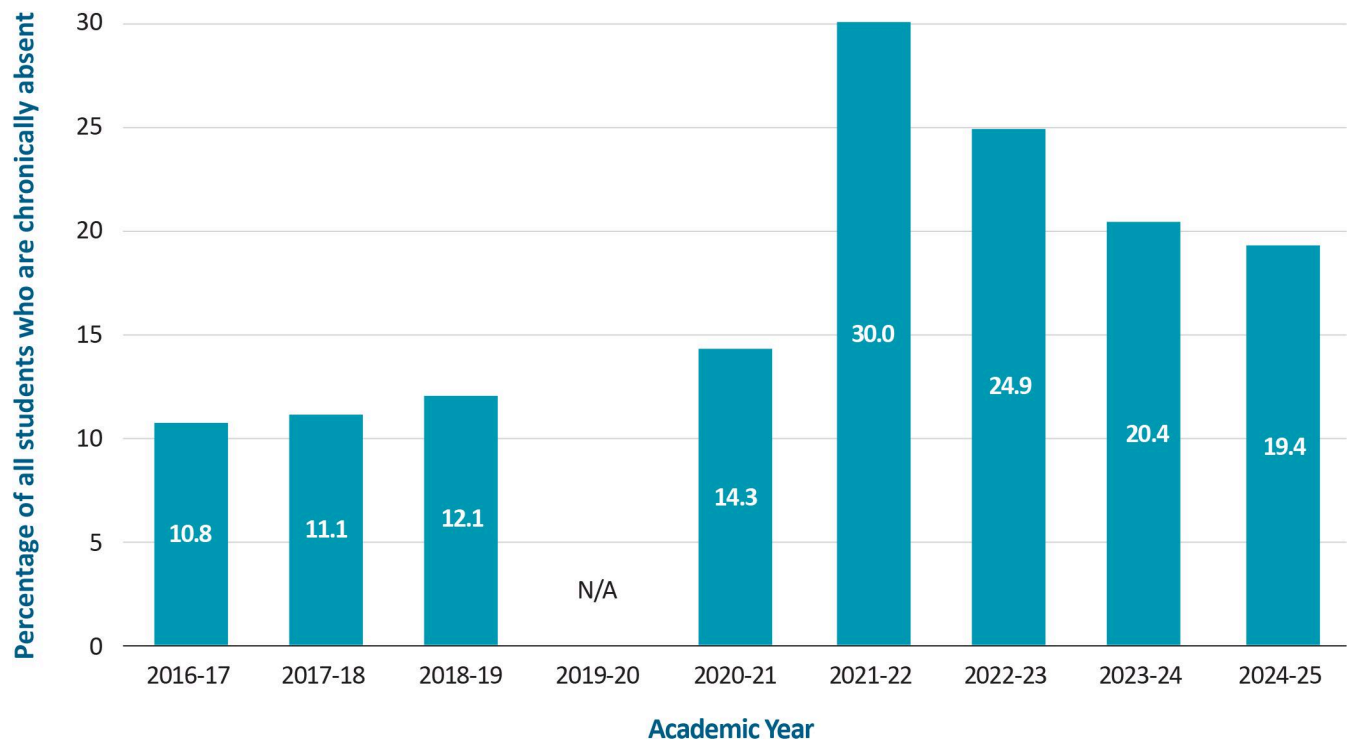


Source: NAEP Data, public school sample. Average NAEP scores are converted to grade level equivalents using methods described in Fahle et al. (2026) and standardized to the national average in 2019.

## Chronic absenteeism has declined from its pandemic peak, but recovery has slowed and rates remain far above pre-pandemic levels

As shown in **Figure 2**, the statewide rate of chronic absenteeism (missing 10 percent or more of days in the school year for any reason) has steadily declined since reaching a peak of 30 percent in 2021-22, but it continues to be nearly double the pre-pandemic rates (19 percent). Notably, the most recent decline in 2024-25 stagnated, only decreasing one percentage point compared to the prior year.

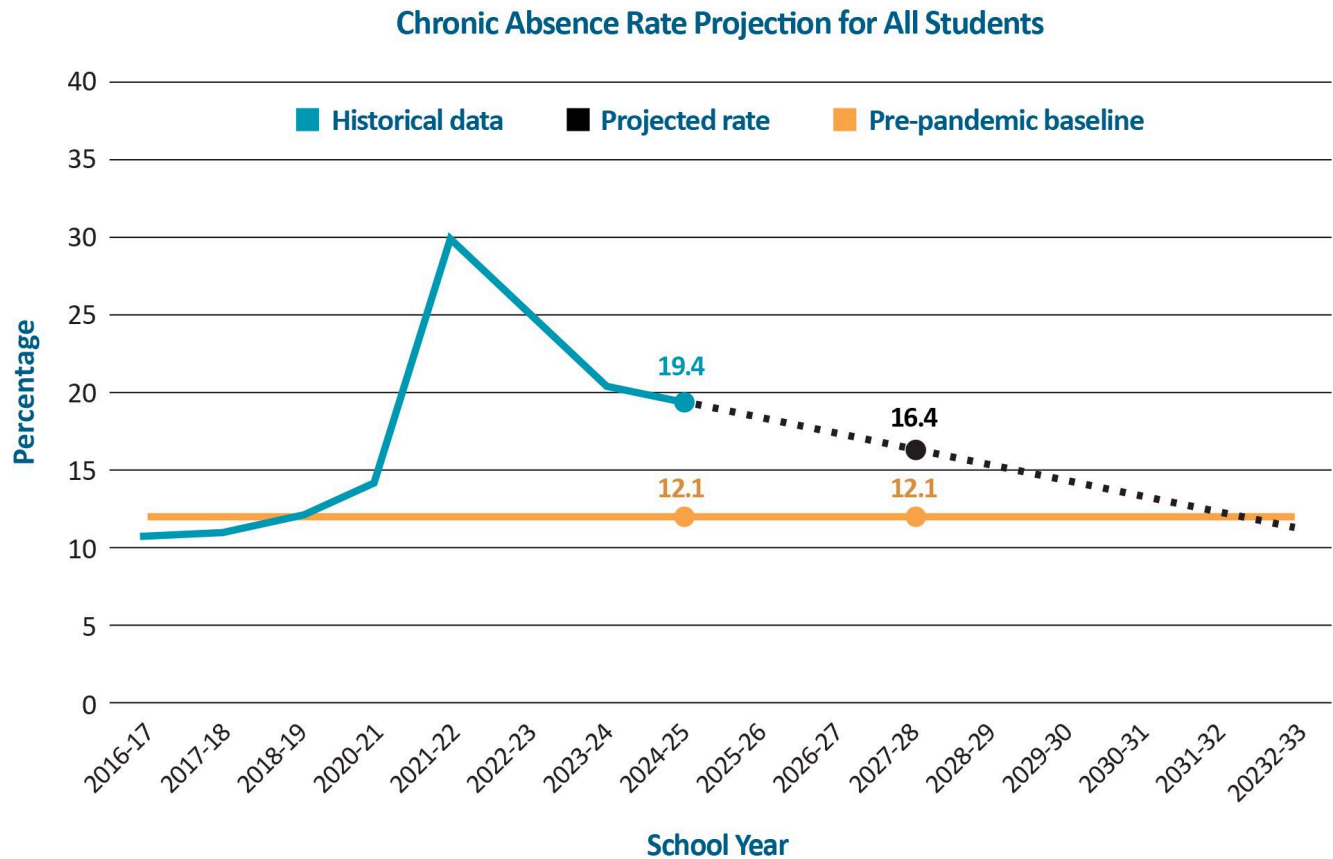
**Figure 2. Yearly Chronic Absence Rates**



Source: California Department of Education (CDE) Dataquest.

*Future Projections.* Assuming historical declines in chronic absence hold constant (1 percentage point annually), returning to rates last seen in 2018-19 will take another 7 years and for some vulnerable student groups, much longer (up to 10–11 years). As shown in **Figure 3**, by 2027-28, rates are predicted to have dropped to 16 percent and, although the state will have made progress towards reducing chronic absence by 50 percent, rates will still be 4 percentage points above baseline.

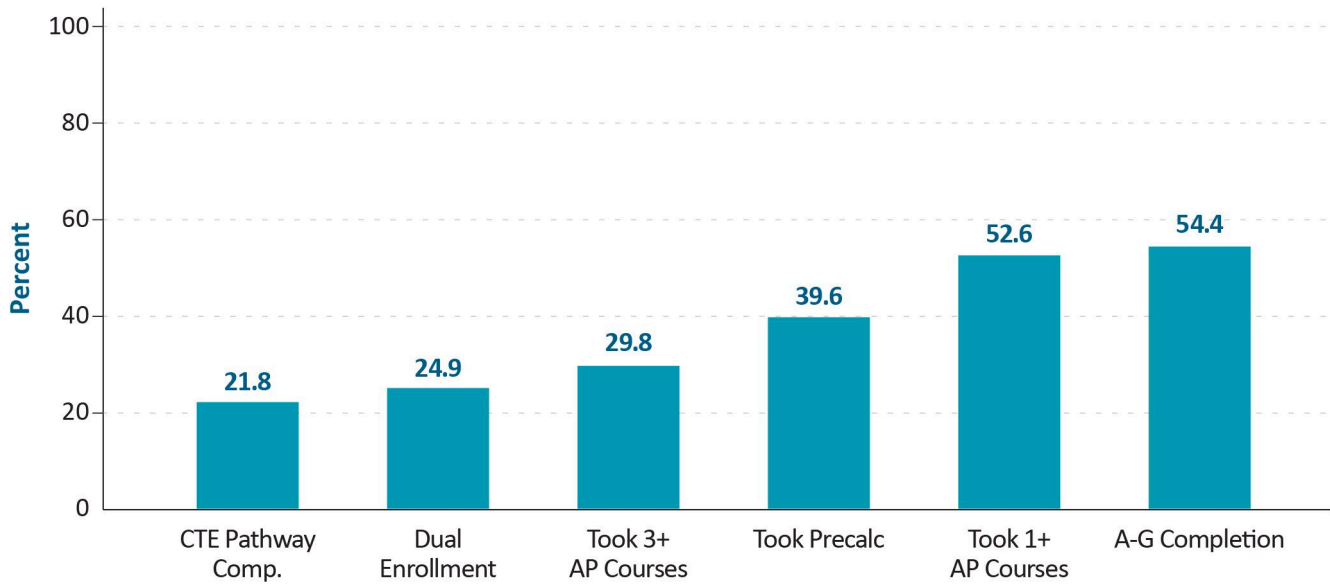
**Figure 3. Chronic Absence Rate Projection for All Students**



**College and career preparatory coursetaking has expanded, but access remains uneven across schools and student groups**

*Enrollment in College and Career Readiness Coursetaking.* **Figure 4** compares participation in the college and career preparatory courses and course pathways among all California public high school graduates in 2022. Over half of California’s public high school graduates in 2022 enrolled in or completed at least one college and career preparatory course or pathway before graduating from high school. Over half (54 percent) completed the A-G course requirements and 53 percent took at least one or more AP courses. In addition, participation rates in AP, advanced math, and dual enrollment courses ranged from 25 percent to over 50 percent. While A-G completion rates have increased since 2016 (46 percent), CTE pathway completion has remained stable over time.

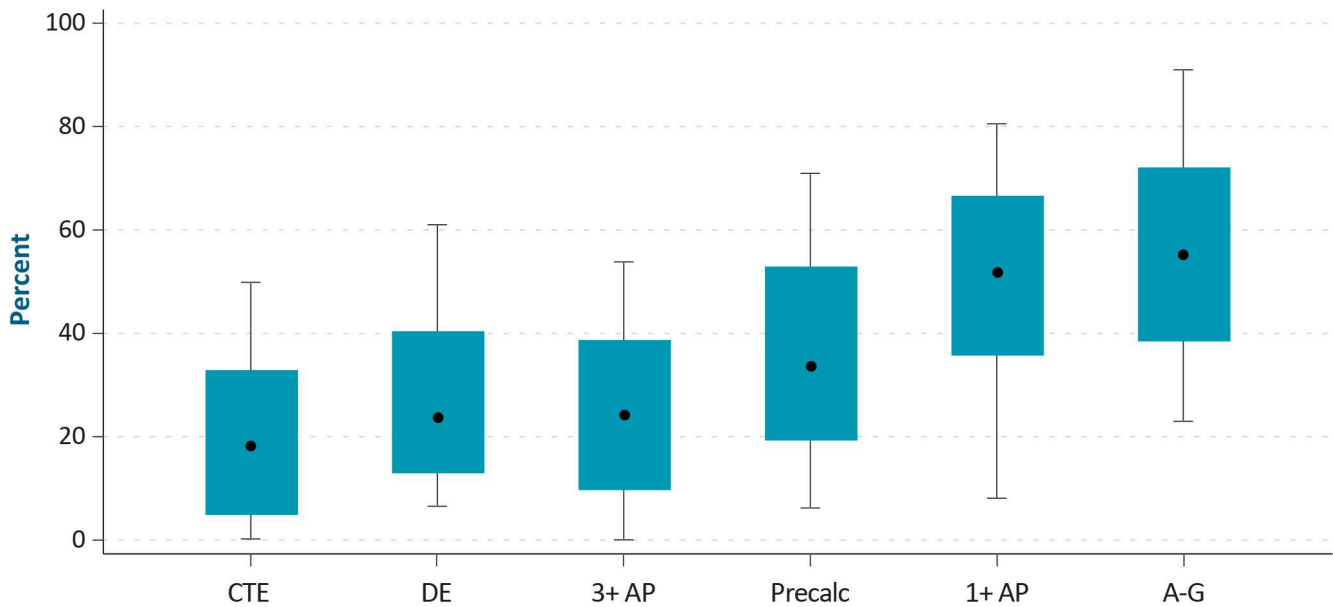
**Figure 4. Statewide Course Enrollment and Pathway Completion Rates**



*Note.* Rates represent the percent of high school seniors enrolled in a California public high school on April 15, 2022 and who completed high school that same year; are included in the CCI accountability cohort in 2021, 2022, or 2023; and for whom 4 years of high school coursetaking data is available. N = 381,385.

*Coursetaking Across Schools.* Given that coursetaking is a function of structural and individual factors, including the policies and practices of schools they attend, participation in college and career preparatory courses varies across schools. **Figure 5** displays the variation in college and career preparatory coursetaking for the 2022 cohort across California public high schools. For example, while half of high schools in the sample had A-G completion rates between 37 percent and 70 percent, one-tenth of schools had an A-G completion rate below 21 percent and another one-tenth of schools had an A-G completion rate over 90 percent.

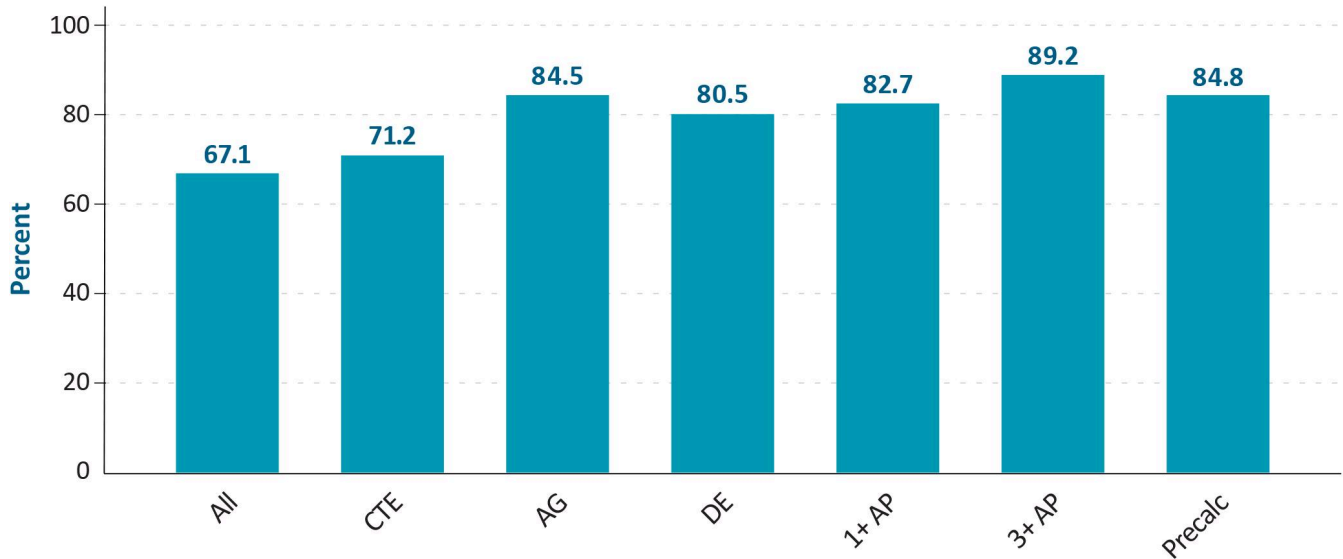
**Figure 5. Distribution of College and Career Preparatory Participation Across Schools**



*Note.* Distribution of school-level participation and completion rates. Boxes represent the interquartile range. Bars represent the range of rates for schools between the 10th and 25th percentile and 75th and 90th percentile, respectively. Includes schools with SOC codes of 65, 66, 67 in the California Department of Education’s Public Schools and Districts data files. Excludes schools with fewer than 15 seniors enrolled on April 15, 2022.

*Relationship between High School Coursetaking and College Enrollment.* Among the Class of 2022, the likelihood of enrolling in college after high school graduation increased if they participated in one or more of the college and career preparatory coursework (**Figure 6**). Students who completed the A-G course requirements (85 percent) were roughly 17 percentage points more likely to enroll in college within 16 months of graduation than all high school completers in 2022 (67 percent). CTE pathway completion was also associated with a greater likelihood of college enrollment (71 percent), though the magnitude of the difference was much smaller and concentrated in 2-year college enrollment.

**Figure 6. Conditional Probability of College Enrollment Given Participation in College and Career Preparatory Coursework**



*Note.* Rates represent the probability of participation among high school seniors enrolled in a California public high school on April 15, 2022 and who completed high school that same year; are included in the CCI accountability cohort in 2021, 2022, or 2023; and for whom 4 years of high school coursetaking data is available.

Further, the likelihood of college enrollment was higher for students in groups who were less likely to participate in college or career readiness courses. For instance, Black and Hispanic students' likelihood of enrolling in college the year following high school graduation was about 60 percent, but if they participated in college or career readiness courses, their likelihood of going to college was closer to 80 percent.

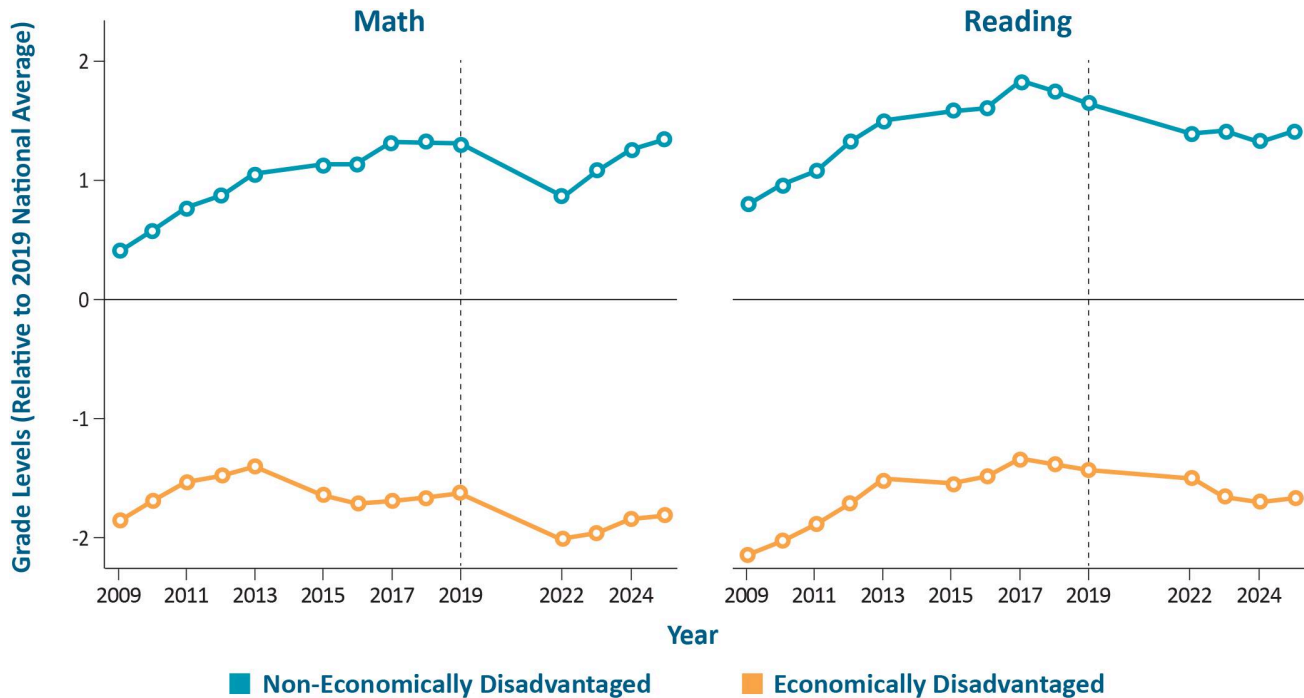
### **Emotional distress among young children is widespread, with higher rates among families facing economic and caregiving pressures**

Based on the RAPID California Voices Survey conducted between November 2022 to December 2025, parents of children under 6 consistently reported emotional distress among their children. In December 2025, 69 percent reported that their child had exhibited at least one emotional distress behavior (fussiness/defiance or fear/anxiety) during the previous month with 63 percent reporting fussiness/defiance and 57 percent reporting fear/anxiety. While distress was widely experienced, it was somewhat more common in certain groups by income levels and geographic locale. Economic pressures leading families to struggle with meeting basic needs, like housing, food, and child care, may be contributing to these rates.

## Disparities persist across achievement, attendance, coursetaking, and early childhood well-being

*Achievement.* The gap in math performance between non-economically disadvantaged and disadvantaged students grew from 2.3 grade levels in 2009 to 3.2 grade levels in 2025, a 37 percent increase (Figure 7).

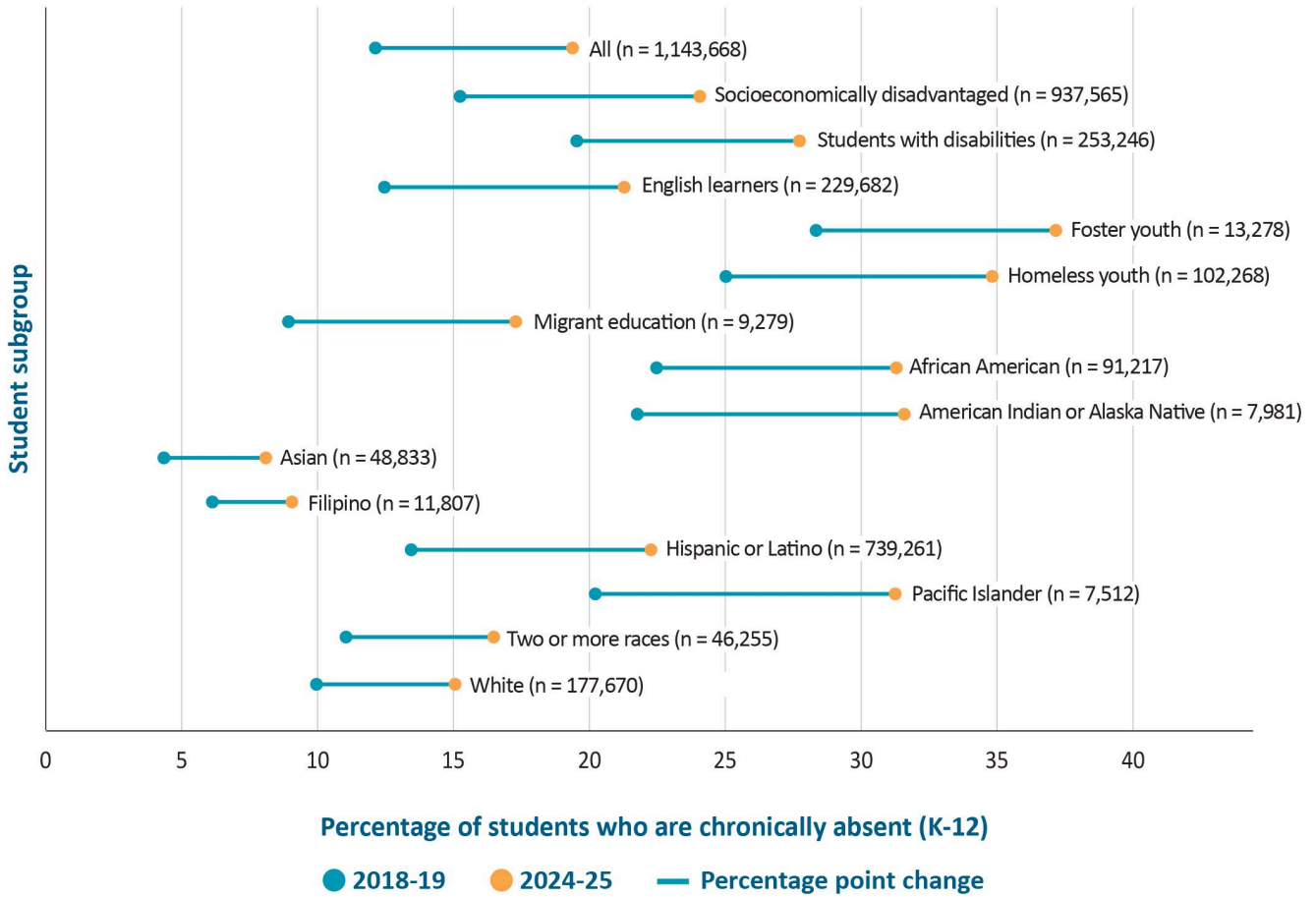
**Figure 7: California Test Score Trends by Student Economic Disadvantage Status, 2009-2025**



Source: Stanford Education Data Archive (SEDA), as compiled from *EDFacts* (2009-2019) and CDE data (2022-2025). Data include all tested public-school students in grades 3-8. Test scores are converted to grade level equivalents using methods described in Fahle et al. (2026) and standardized to the national average in 2019 and then averaged across grades 3-8.

*Chronic Absenteeism.* When comparing rates between 2018-19 and 2024-25, increases in chronic absence among particular disadvantaged student groups were greater than the increase for all students (7.3 percentage points [pp]). As shown in Figure 8, the largest increases occurred for homeless youth (9.9 pp), foster youth (9.6 pp), and socioeconomically disadvantaged students (8.9 pp). By race and ethnicity, increases were most pronounced among students who identify as African American (8.8 pp), American Indian or Alaska Native (9.8 pp), Pacific Islander (11.1 pp), and Hispanic or Latino (8.9 pp).

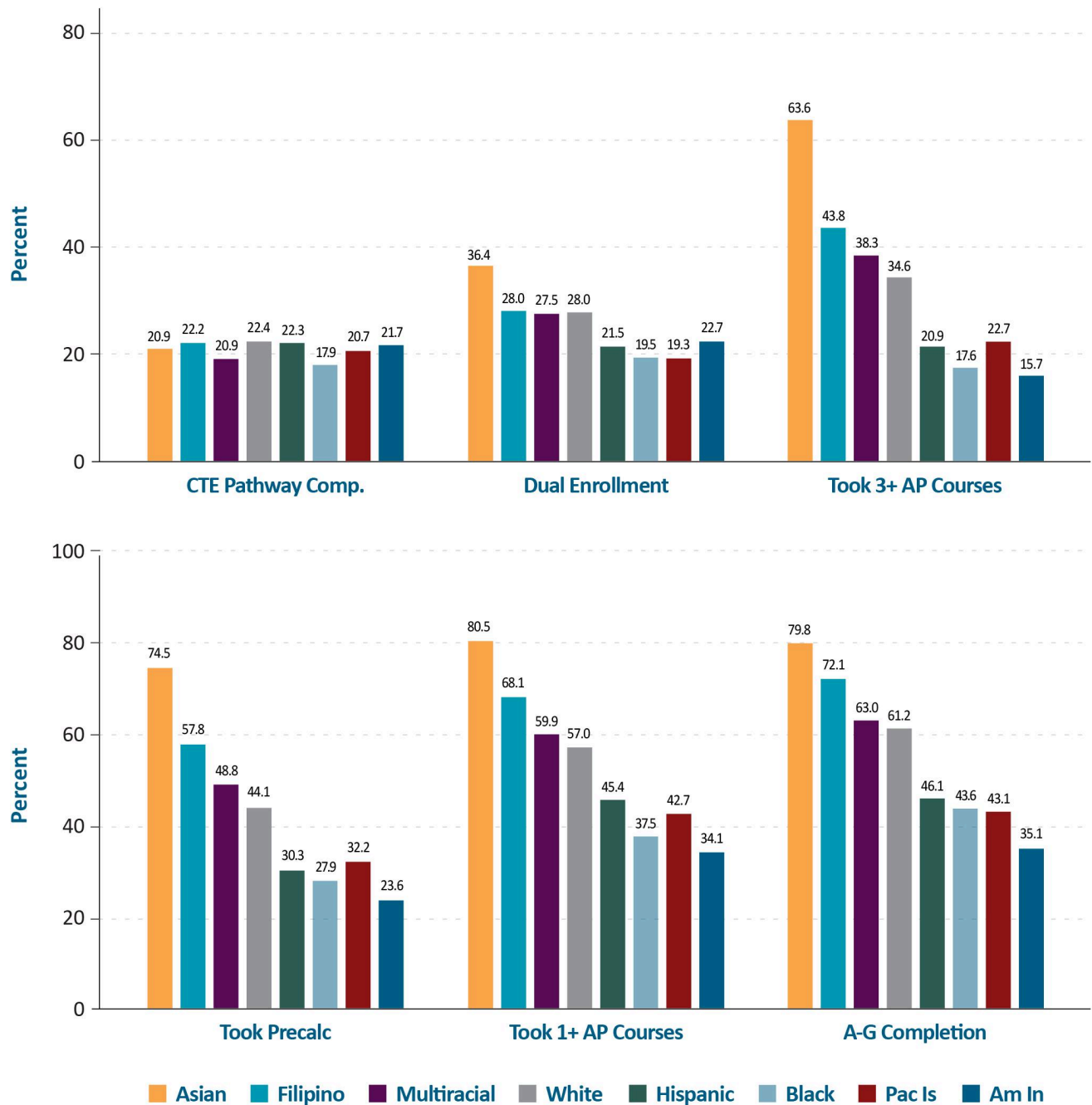
**Figure 8. Pre- vs. Post-Pandemic Chronic Absence Rates by Student Group**



Source: California Department of Education (CDE) Dataquest.

*High School Coursetaking.* Asian, Filipino, White, and Multiracial students are much more likely to take college preparatory courses than their Hispanic, Black, Pacific Islander, or American Indian peers (**Figure 9**). For example, Asian, Filipino, White, and Multiracial students (range: 61 percent to 80 percent) are roughly 20 percentage points more likely to complete the A-G course requirements than their peers (range: 35 percent to 46 percent).

**Figure 9. Course Enrollment/Completion by Race/Ethnicity**



*Childhood Emotional Distress.* While childhood emotional distress was a common occurrence, reported by 69 percent of families overall, rates were 12 percentage points higher among lower-income families (77 percent) relative to middle- and higher-income families (65 percent each). There were also prominent gaps between families supporting a child with and without disabilities (79 percent vs. 68 percent), and families in rural versus urban areas (89 percent vs. 68 percent).

## Implications for California

The research evidence on achievement, chronic absenteeism, high school coursetaking, and emotional distress has direct implications for decisions that California is now facing about students and their futures.

### **Sustaining progress in achievement while addressing remaining gaps**

California's achievement trends show progress relative to the nation in both reading and mathematics, along with persistent gaps that are visible by third grade. Math disparities have widened most sharply, but achievement in both subjects remains slightly below the national average. California currently lacks the data needed to determine how much of those early differences arise from access to child care and preschool, differences in K-3 schooling experiences, or other early conditions. A statewide kindergarten readiness assessment could help California evaluate investments in child care, preschool, and Transitional Kindergarten; understand whether elementary schools are reducing inequality; and give kindergarten teachers better information about students' entering skills. These patterns highlight the importance of the conditions that support continued improvement in reading and mathematics, especially in communities where achievement remains lowest or has declined the most.

### **Chronic absence as an ongoing challenge**

The evidence on chronic absenteeism points to a recovery challenge that varies across students and communities. No single strategy is likely to reduce chronic absenteeism across all contexts. Absence patterns depend on who is missing school, why they are missing school, and what resources are available to respond. Strategies to reduce absence are more effective when they are connected to underlying root causes, such as students' sense of belonging in school, and embedded in a broader system of support. Vulnerable students, especially students experiencing homelessness and foster youth, may require more targeted assistance through advocates, liaisons, and connections to resources beyond what schools can provide on their own.

### **Coursetaking as a key structure shaping opportunity**

High school coursetaking is an important mechanism through which California students gain access to college and career opportunities. The evidence points to the value of more integrated advanced course options across programs, including pathways that allow students to complete multiple requirements through a single sequence. For example, CTE courses that are also A-G approved can help connect career preparation with college eligibility. The evidence also highlights structural barriers to advanced course enrollment, including opt-in placement systems and master schedule conflicts. Automatic

enrollment policies and more intentionally designed schedules are examples of approaches that could change which students have access to advanced or higher-level coursework.

### **Early childhood conditions and emotional well-being**

Emotional distress among children under six appears widely across families in California and is more common among those facing economic and caregiving pressures. These patterns point to the role of early environments in shaping children’s social-emotional development before they enter the K-12 system. Factors such as housing stability, food security, access to child care, and family stress influence children’s early experiences and may have implications for later learning and well-being. California’s Transitional Kindergarten program provides one context in which structured learning opportunities and social environments can support children’s cognitive and social-emotional development while also offering families a stable caregiving setting during the school day.

### **Disparities across student outcomes and opportunity structures**

Differences across student groups appear consistently across achievement, chronic absenteeism, high school coursetaking, and early childhood emotional distress. These differences vary by socioeconomic status, race and ethnicity, disability status, English learner status, housing status, and family income. Some gaps have widened, particularly in math achievement and chronic absenteeism. These patterns indicate that student outcomes are shaped by opportunity structures that differ across communities, including access to instructional quality, course offerings, supports, and early learning environments. Understanding how these differences emerge across the educational pipeline can help clarify where variation in opportunity is most consequential.

## **Conclusion**

California’s students show signs of progress across several important outcomes, but the evidence also points to uneven and incomplete improvement. Achievement in math and reading has improved relative to the national average, chronic absenteeism has declined from its pandemic peak, and completion of college preparatory coursework has increased. At the same time, students still perform slightly below the national average, chronic absenteeism remains elevated, and access to college and career preparatory coursework varies widely across schools.

Across the four reports reviewed here, disparities by socioeconomic status, race and ethnicity, disability status, housing status, and family income remain central. Some gaps have widened, especially in math achievement and chronic absenteeism. These patterns show that student outcomes are shaped by

opportunity structures that begin before kindergarten, continue through K-12 schooling, and affect students' pathways into college and adulthood.

The evidence points to the importance of sustained attention to achievement, attendance, coursetaking, and early childhood well-being as connected parts of students' educational trajectories. Progress on any one of these outcomes will depend in part on the supports, learning opportunities, and conditions students experience across communities.

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