

Legislative Report

Closing the Achievement Gaps Report

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Department of Education



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Legislative Requirement Iowa Code section 256.9(45)

Prepare and submit to the chairpersons and ranking members of the senate and house education committees a report on the state's progress toward closing the achievement gap, including student achievement for minority subgroups, and a comprehensive summary of state agency and local district activities and practices taken in the past year to close the achievement gap.

Shifting Student Demographics

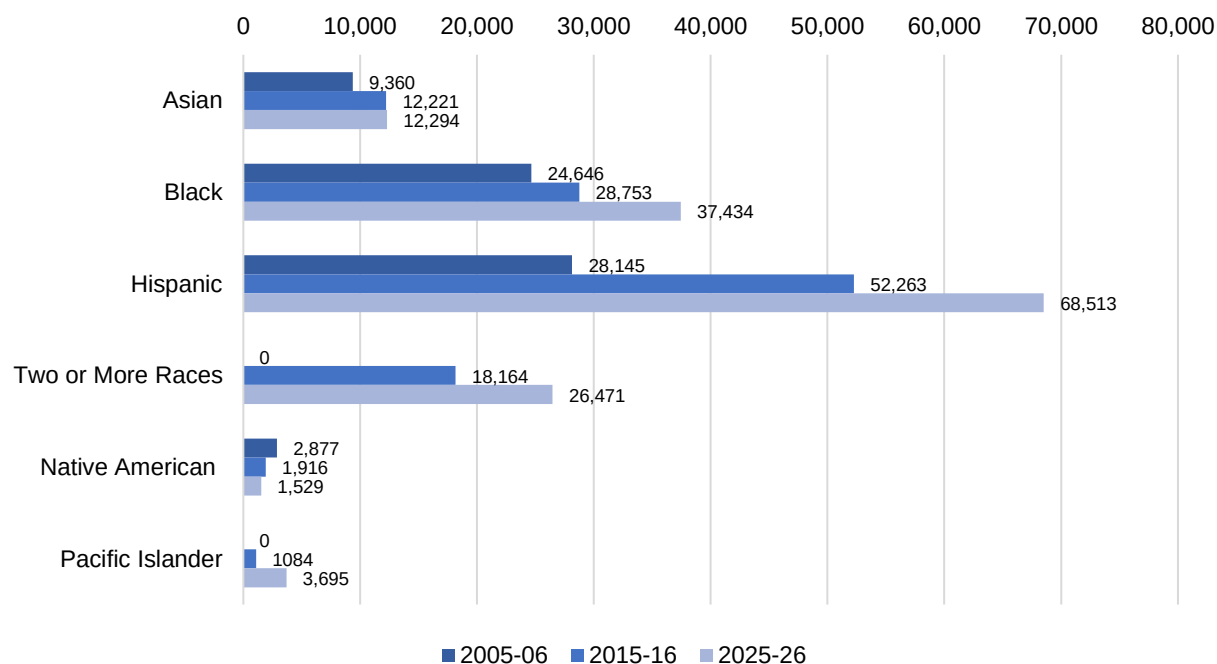
Over the past two decades, there has been a shift in the demographics of students attending Iowa public school districts. Table 1 provides a high-level summary of the percentage of students of color and white students over the past two decades. In the 2025-26 school year, 30% of students in Iowa districts are students of color, compared to 23% a decade ago and 13% two decades ago. At the same time, the percentage of white students has declined. In the 2005-06 school year, 87% of students were white, compared to 70% in the 2025-26 school year.

Table 1: PK-12 Public School Enrollment

School Year	Students of Color	White	Total Enrollment	Percent of Students of Color	Percent White
2025-26	149,936	346,681	496,617	30.2%	69.8%
2015-16	114,401	394,662	509,063	22.5%	77.5%
2005-06	65,028	418,454	483,482	13.4%	86.6%

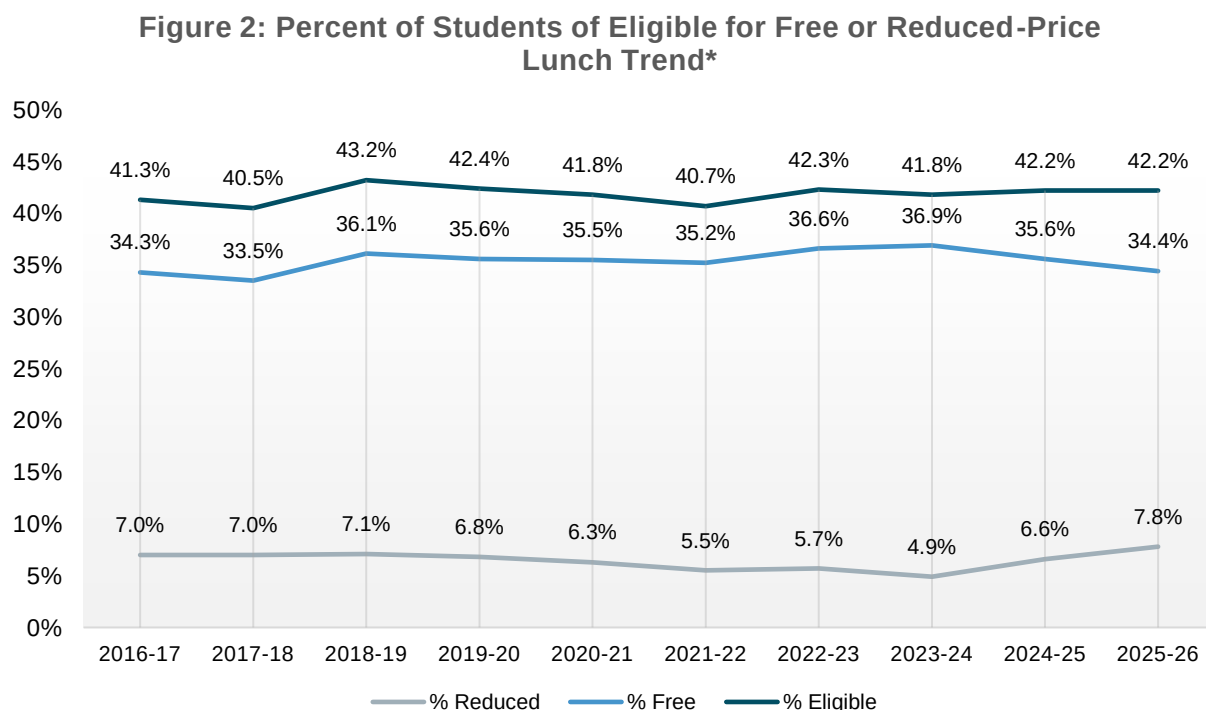
Figure 1 provides a trend line of the changes in each race/ethnicity student group over this period. There have been sizable increases in Hispanic and Black students over the past two decades. The Pacific Islander and Two or More Races student groups were added in the 2009-10 school year, so prior trend data is unavailable.

Figure 1: Enrollment Trend - Students of Color



Examining a 10-year timeframe, the percentage of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch has remained fairly stable with a slight increase of less than a percentage point over this period. Free or reduced-price lunch eligibility data is used as a proxy for low socioeconomic status in K-12 education. Figure 2 provides a trend line of the percentage of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. Interestingly, in the 2023-24 school year, the percentage of students eligible for reduced-price lunch decreased to the lowest level over the past decade at 4.9%. However, this number increased 2.9 percentage points over the next two years to 7.8% in the 2025-26 school year.

Household income determines free and reduced-price lunch eligibility using the U.S. Census Bureau's poverty threshold. For the 2025-26 school year, the poverty threshold for a family of four was \$32,150. Students are eligible for free lunch if their household income is less than 130% of the poverty threshold, while the reduced-price lunch eligibility threshold is 185% of the poverty level. The trend in Figure 2 suggests that, in the 2025-26 school year, there was a larger percentage of students living in households with income between 130% and 185% of the poverty threshold than at any other point over the past decade.



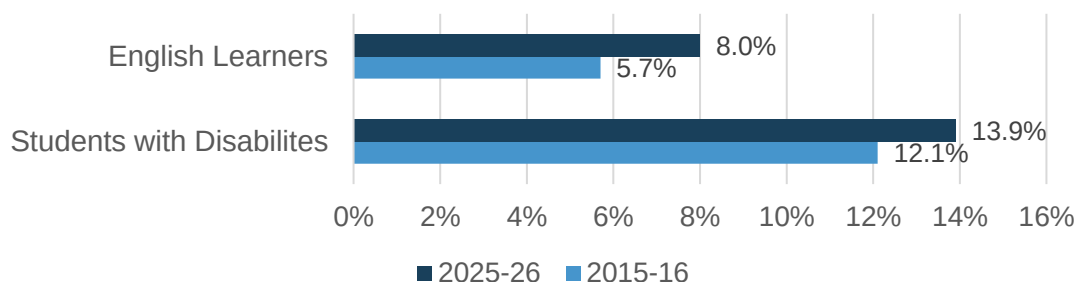
* % Free includes the percentage of students whose family income is less than 130% of the poverty level.

% Reduced includes the percentage of students whose family income is less than 185% but greater than 130% of the poverty level.

% Eligible is the combination of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch.

Figure 3 shows the percentage of Iowa students who are English learners and students with disabilities over the past decade. The percentage of English learners in Iowa schools has increased to 8.0% in 2025-26, and the percentage of students with disabilities has increased 1.8 percentage points over the past decade.

Figure 3: Percentage of English Learners and Students with Disabilities



The Achievement Gap and Iowa's Remarkable Results

The achievement gap is defined as the difference in the average performance between student groups and can be found across multiple outcome measures, such as assessment results, high school course selection, dropout rates and college-enrollment rates. The achievement gap is well documented by a large body of empirical research and academic scholars (Hanushek & Rivkin, 2009; Howard, 2010; Rogers et al., 2018; Scammacca et al., 2020).

Each year the Department produces the *Closing the Achievement Gaps* report in order to further examine the gap between student groups in Iowa and highlight state and district activities to narrow the gap. This year's report will: 1) highlight the remarkable gains Iowa has seen across a number of key indicators, 2) analyze the gap between Iowa students and the nation, 3) examine the gap in chronic absenteeism rates and 4) highlight state and district activities to close the achievement gap. This year's report will focus on the achievement gap between three prevalent student groups including students with disabilities, English learners and students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch.

Iowa's Remarkable Results

Over the past two years, Iowa has seen remarkable results across a number of key education measures. Results include an increase in overall school performance, gains in early literacy, improved attendance, increases in work-based learning and improvements in schools identified in need of support.

Increase in Overall School Performance

Statewide scores for Iowa schools in the 2024-25 school year improved using the same high expectations from the prior year. Nearly 56% of schools performed in the top three of six rating categories, which is up 10 percentage points compared to 46% in the prior year. More than four in 10 schools (41.9%, or 528) moved up one or more rating categories. Only 17.7% of schools moved down one or more rating categories, and the rest did not change.

Gains in Early Literacy

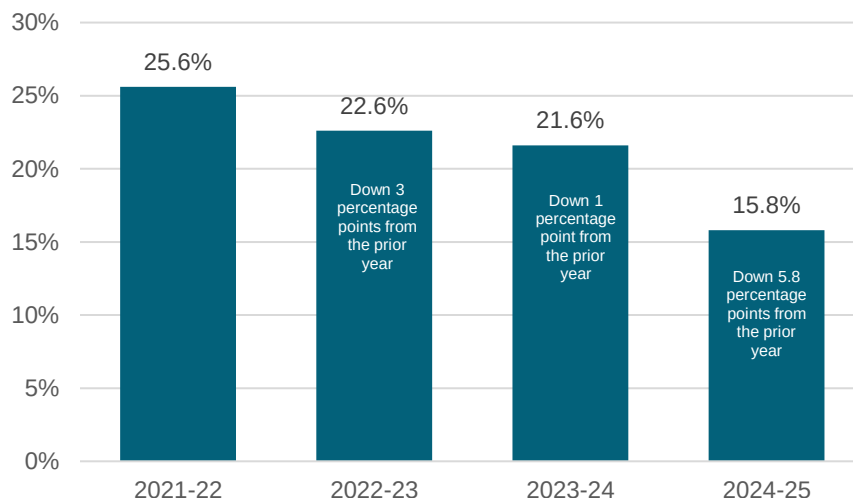
Following the enactment of landmark early literacy legislation in 2024, students who were in third grade during the 2023-24 school year showed outstanding gains as fourth graders in 2024-25, with English Language Arts (ELA) proficiency increasing 11 percentage points. Compared to last year, ELA proficiency rates increased or were maintained in grades 3-5 and 8-10, with

grades 3 and 8 showing the most significant increases of 4 and 3 percentage points, respectively.

Attendance Improving

Iowa's average percent of K-12 public school students who were chronically absent dropped 5.8 percentage points since the 2023-24 school year, falling to 15.8% in the 2024-25 school year. Over just the past three years, Iowa had a 9.8 percentage point decrease in chronic absenteeism.

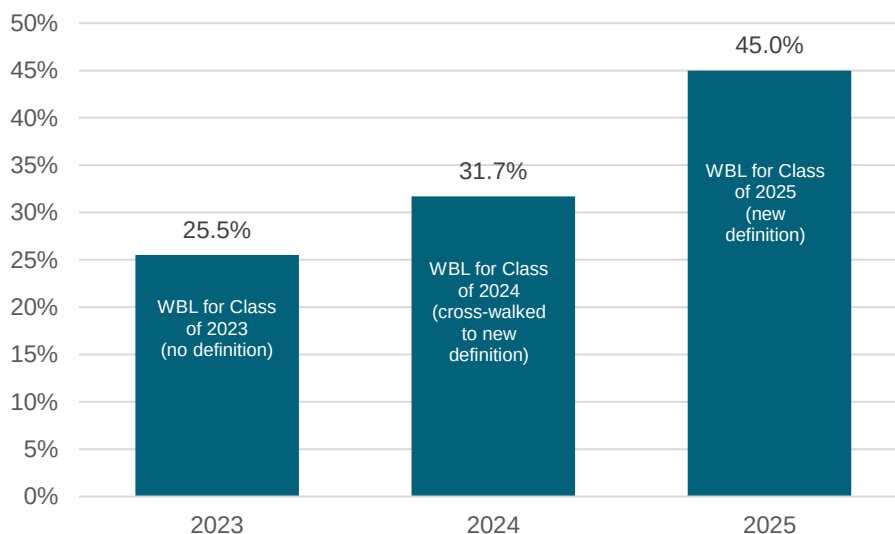
Figure 4 – Chronic Absenteeism Rates



Work-based Learning Growing

In the 2024-25 school year, 45% of all seniors, or 15,154 students, participated in a work-based learning experience, a 19.5 percentage point increase and a 76% rate of increase over two years.

Figure 5 – Work-Based Learning Rates



Schools in Need of Support Improving

The Iowa Department of Education provided over 6,000 hours of school-based expert leadership support and classroom coaching and modeling in Iowa's 35 Comprehensive schools. This resulted in 32 of 35 Comprehensive schools improving, with an average increase of 5.4 percentage points in their overall accountability score. Additionally, 8 Comprehensive schools increased more than 10 percentage points.

The Iowa Department of Education partnered with Iowa's nine AEAs to provide over 1,000 hours of consistent, school-based improvement support in Iowa's Targeted schools. As a result, 136 of 377 Targeted Support and Improvement (TSI) schools identified in 2024 were able to exit Targeted status by ensuring all students are supported in meeting high expectations. There were also 99 schools newly identified as Targeted in 2025, and 233 Targeted schools identified in 2024 who did not exit status in 2025. In total, the number of Targeted schools dropped by 39 schools, decreasing 10 percent from 377 in 2024 to 338 in 2025.

The Achievement Gap – National Assessment of Educational Progress

The National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) is the only continuing and nationally representative assessment of what our nation's students know and can do. NAEP, often called the "gold standard" of assessments, is developed using the best thinking of assessment and content specialists, education experts and educators from across the US. NAEP provides a common measure of student achievement across the country. Because states have their own unique assessments with different content and standards, it is impossible to use them as a means to compare across states' content and achievement standards. However, such comparisons are possible with NAEP because the questions and administration of the assessment are the same across all states.

The main NAEP tests are administered nationally every two years in grades 4 and 8 in both reading and mathematics. Iowa's participation in NAEP goes back over 30 years, allowing for long-term analysis across multiple grades and content areas. The most recent administration of NAEP just occurred in spring 2026. Unfortunately, the results from the spring 2026 administration are not expected to be released until early 2027. The spring 2026 results will provide the next opportunity to understand how students in Iowa and the nation are performing compared to pre-pandemic achievement.

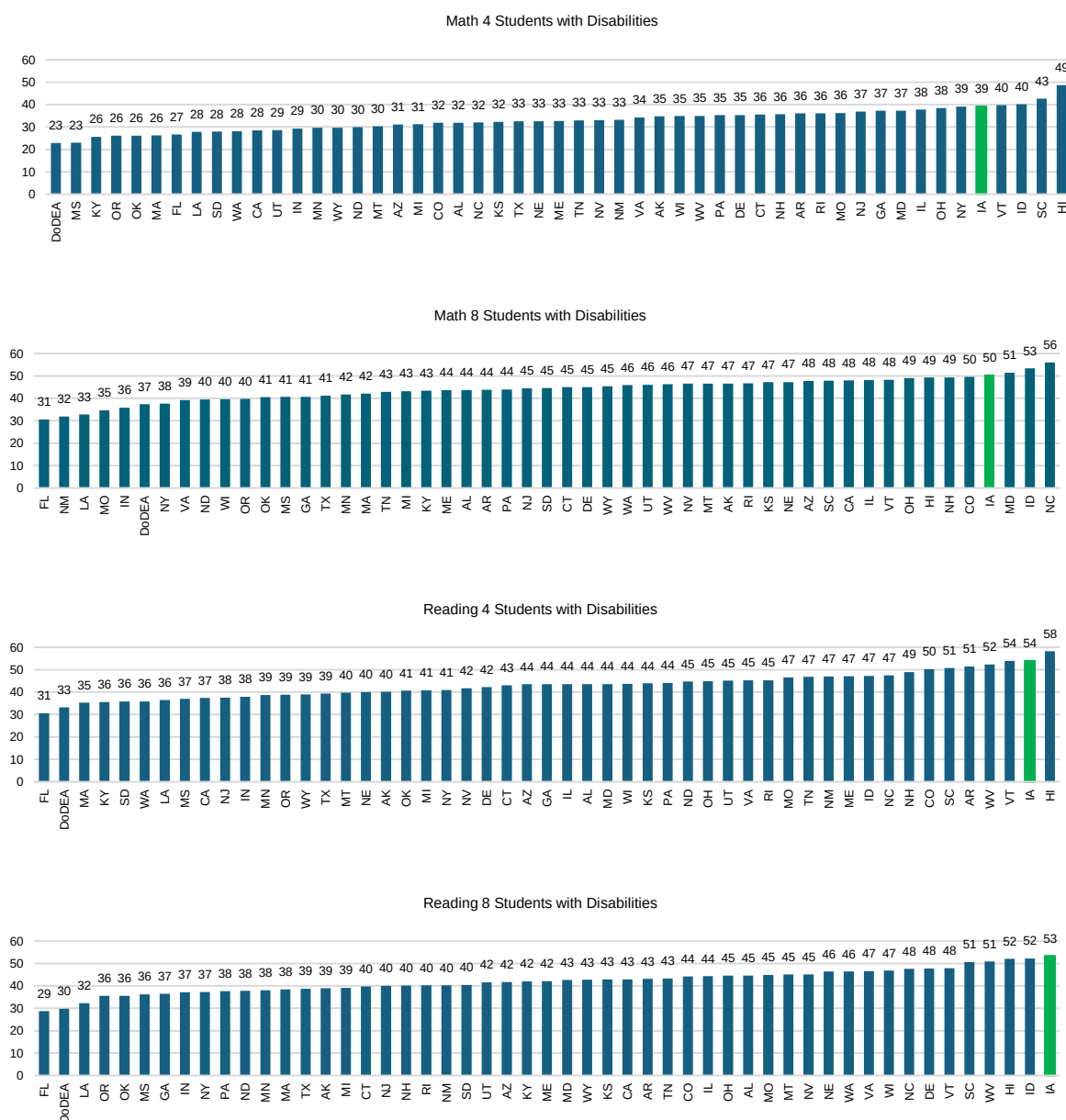
In Iowa, for the 2024 NAEP administration, about 180 schools with about 3,500 students per grade level and content area participated. NAEP employs a robust stratified sample to ensure that the results are representative. NAEP also monitors states' inclusion rates for test participants to ensure the results for each state are not biased.

The data presented in the *Closing the Achievement Gaps* report includes the most recently available data from the spring 2024 NAEP administration. The NAEP results provide an overview of the achievement gap between Iowa and the nation for three important student groups: students with disabilities, English learners and students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. This analysis answers the question "How does Iowa's achievement compare to other states across the U.S.?"

Figures 6 to 8 provide detail for each grade 4 and 8 in reading and math for all states. The figures show the scale score differences of the average score between student groups demonstrating the gap in student performance. States who are on the left side of the figure have a smaller achievement gap and those on the right side have a larger achievement gap. Iowa's achievement gap is highlighted in green.

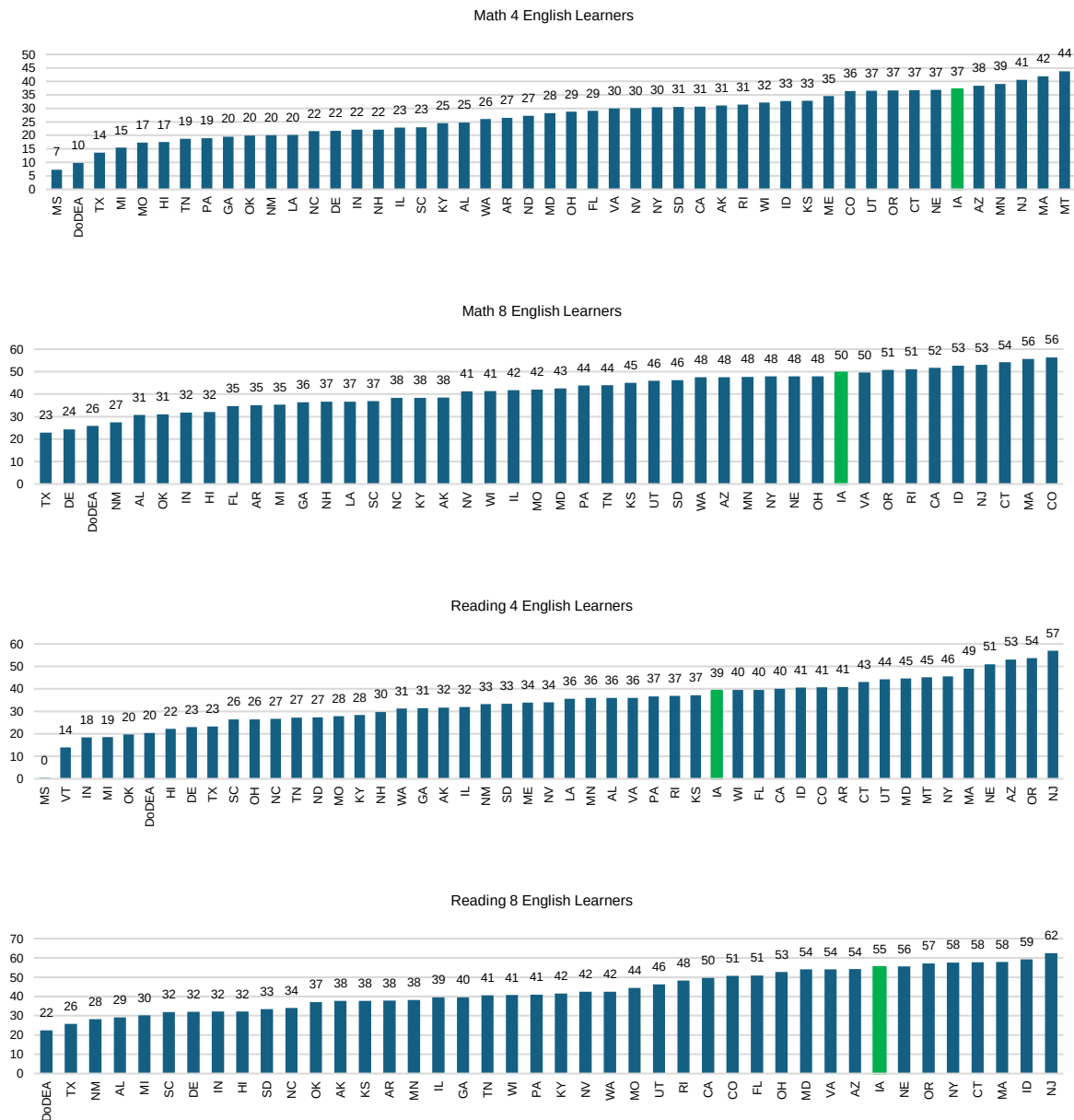
Averaged across the main NAEP tested grades and subjects, Iowa has the third largest performance gap for students with disabilities in the nation. Specifically, Figure 6 shows that Iowa has the 5th largest achievement gap in the nation between students with and without disabilities in grade 4 math. The gap is the 4th largest for grade 8 math, 2nd largest in grade 4 reading and the largest in grade 8 reading.

Figure 6: NAEP – Average Scale Score Gap by State – Students with Disabilities



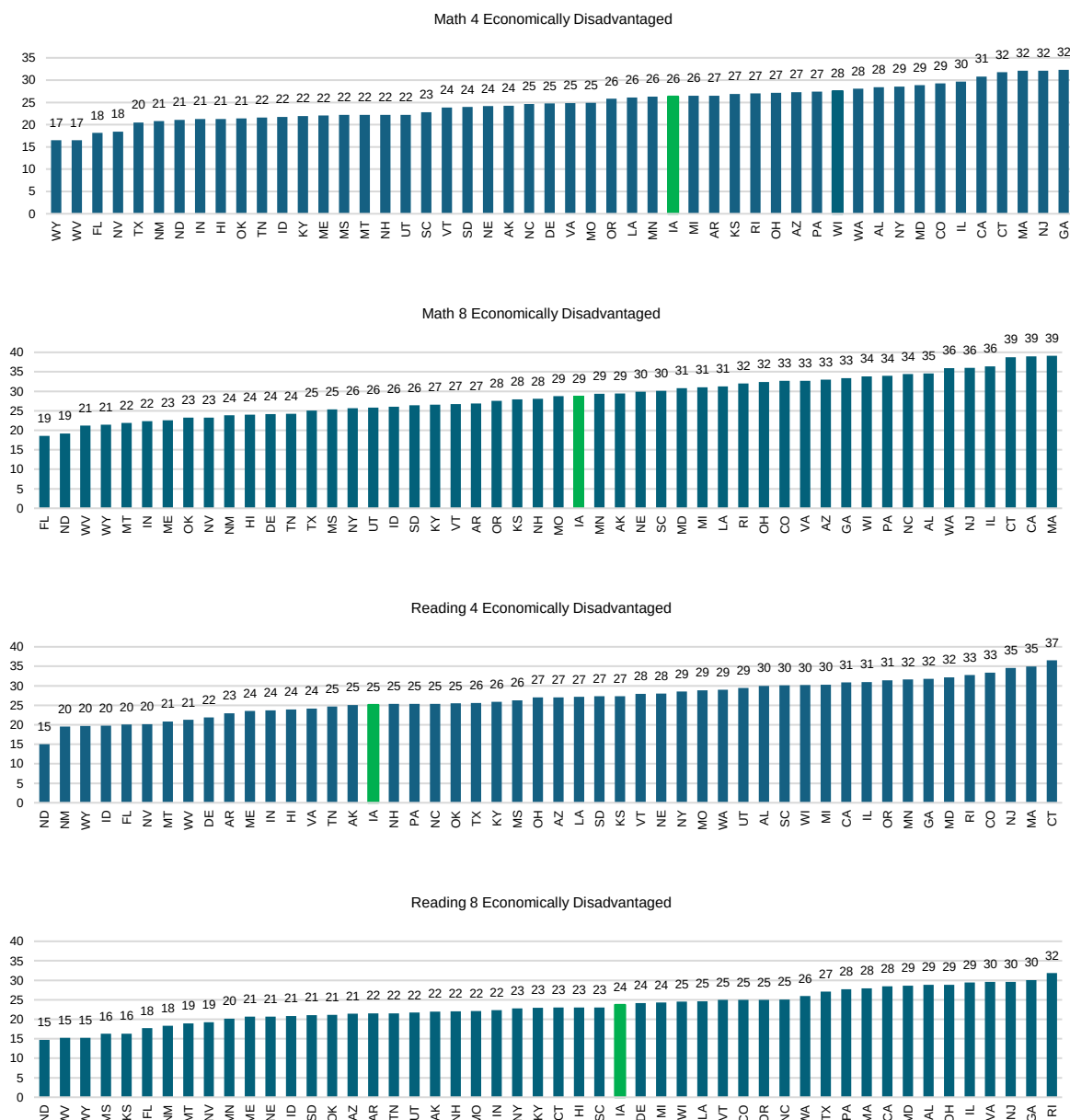
The gap in average achievement for Iowa's English learners is not as sizable as the gap for students with disabilities. However, Iowa's gap for English learners is one of the largest in the nation and ranks the 10th largest in the U.S. The gap in average achievement between English learners and non-EL students ranks 6th in grade 4 math, 10th in grade 8 math, 17th in grade 4 reading and 8th in grade 8 reading.

Figure 7: NAEP – Average Scale Score Gap by State – English Learners



Iowa's gap in performance between students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch and their more affluent classmates is in the middle of the pack compared to other states. Iowa ranks 25th, which is much better than the gap for students with disabilities or English learners. Figure 8 shows Iowa's gap is the 20th largest in grade 4 math, 24th largest in grade 8 math, 34th largest in grade 4 reading and 22nd largest in grade 8 reading.

Figure 8: NAEP – Average Scale Score Gap by State – Students Eligible for Free or Reduced-Price



Chronic Absenteeism

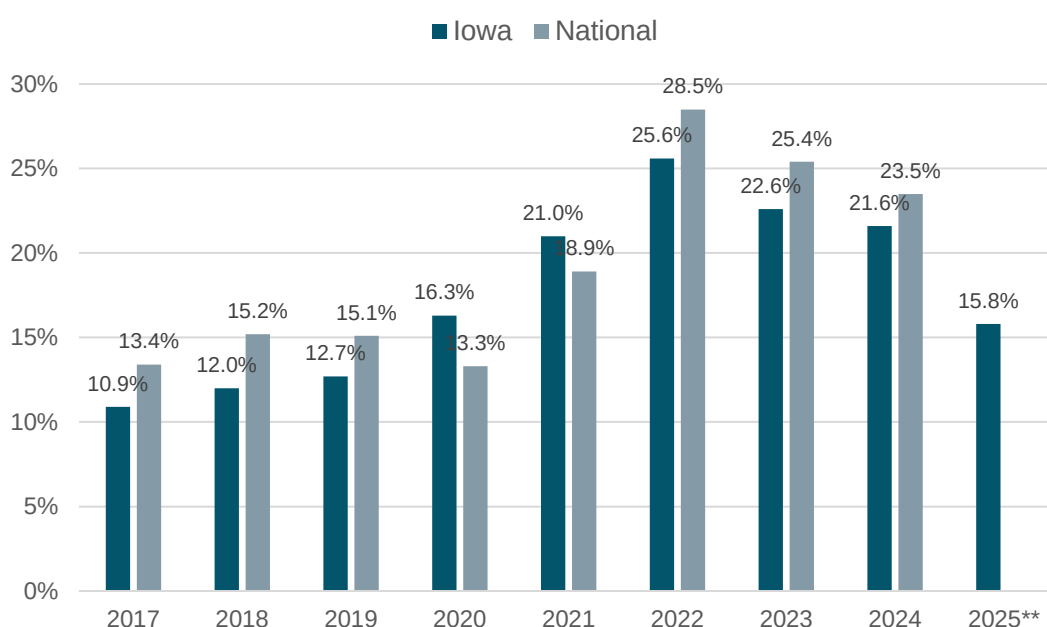
Chronic absenteeism rates have changed significantly over the last nine years in Iowa and across the nation. The national definition of chronic absenteeism is a student who misses 10 percent or more of their school year. Student attendance is a critical prerequisite to student learning. Students who miss significant schooling perform much lower than their peers who

attend school regularly as measured by assessment results but can also be seen across multiple measures.

Figure 9 shows chronic absenteeism rates for Iowa and the nation from 2017 to 2025. The national absenteeism rates are not yet available for 2025. Compared to the nation, Iowa's overall rates are much lower for 2017 to 2019 and 2022 to 2024. In 2020 and 2021, the national rates were lower than Iowa. However, there are concerns about the reliability of national rates for 2020 and 2021 due to COVID-19 attendance reporting concerns, with many students learning in remote or hybrid learning models.

Iowa and the nation had a similar trend with slight gains in absenteeism rates pre-pandemic and large jumps in rates starting in 2021 and peaking in 2022. Similarly, from 2022 to 2024, Iowa's rates dropped four percentage points while the nation dropped five percentage points.

Figure 9: Iowa vs. the Nation - Chronic Absenteeism Rates*



* National rates from Return to Learn Tracker (<https://www.returntolearntracker.net/>)

** 2025 National rate unavailable

Table 2 provides the difference in absenteeism rate between Iowa and the nation from 2017 to 2024. The range in difference in rates between Iowa and the nation is between 3.2 and 1.9 percentage points. In six of the eight years available, Iowa's rates have been lower than the nation. As mentioned earlier, there are concerns about the accuracy of attendance rates in the two years in which the national rates are below Iowa. Across the eight years, the gap in absenteeism rates have appeared to close with Iowa having just under a 2 percentage point difference in 2024.

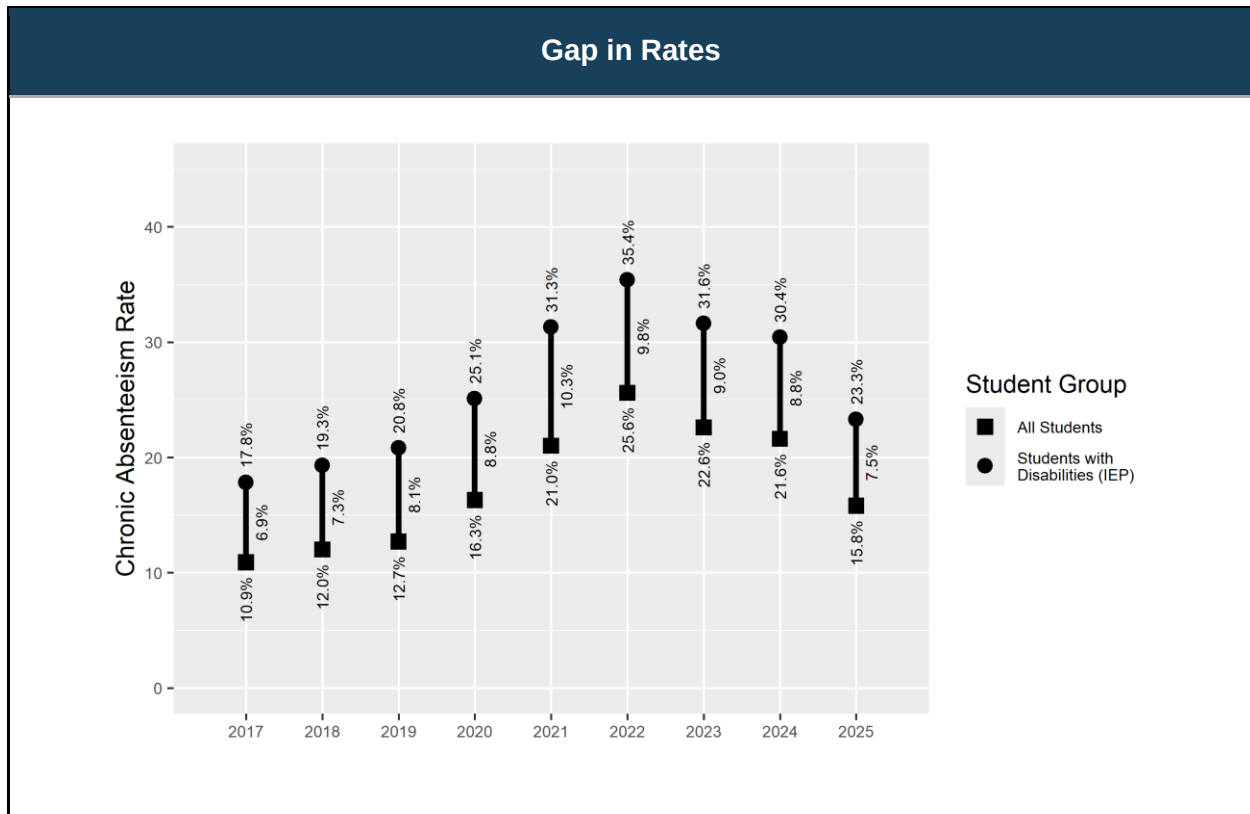
Table 2: Chronic Absenteeism Difference in Rates Iowa vs. Nation

2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
2.5	3.2	2.4	-3.0*	-2.1*	2.9	2.8	1.9

* Concerns about the reliability of national rates for 2020 and 2021 due to accurate attendance reporting with a large numbers of students in remote and hybrid learning models during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Figures 10 to 12 show the Iowa chronic absenteeism rates for students with disabilities, English learners and students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. Examining the long-term trend of absenteeism gaps between students with disabilities and the statewide average shows an interesting trend over this nine-year period. The gap is the smallest in 2017 and continues to increase to its peak in the 2020-21 school year. In the 2020-21 school year, the rate of absenteeism was 31.3% for students with disabilities compared to 21.0% for all students, with a gap of just over 10 percentage points. The gap then starts to narrow from that period to 7.5 percentage points in 2024-25, which is similar to the gap (7.3%) from the 2017-18 school year.

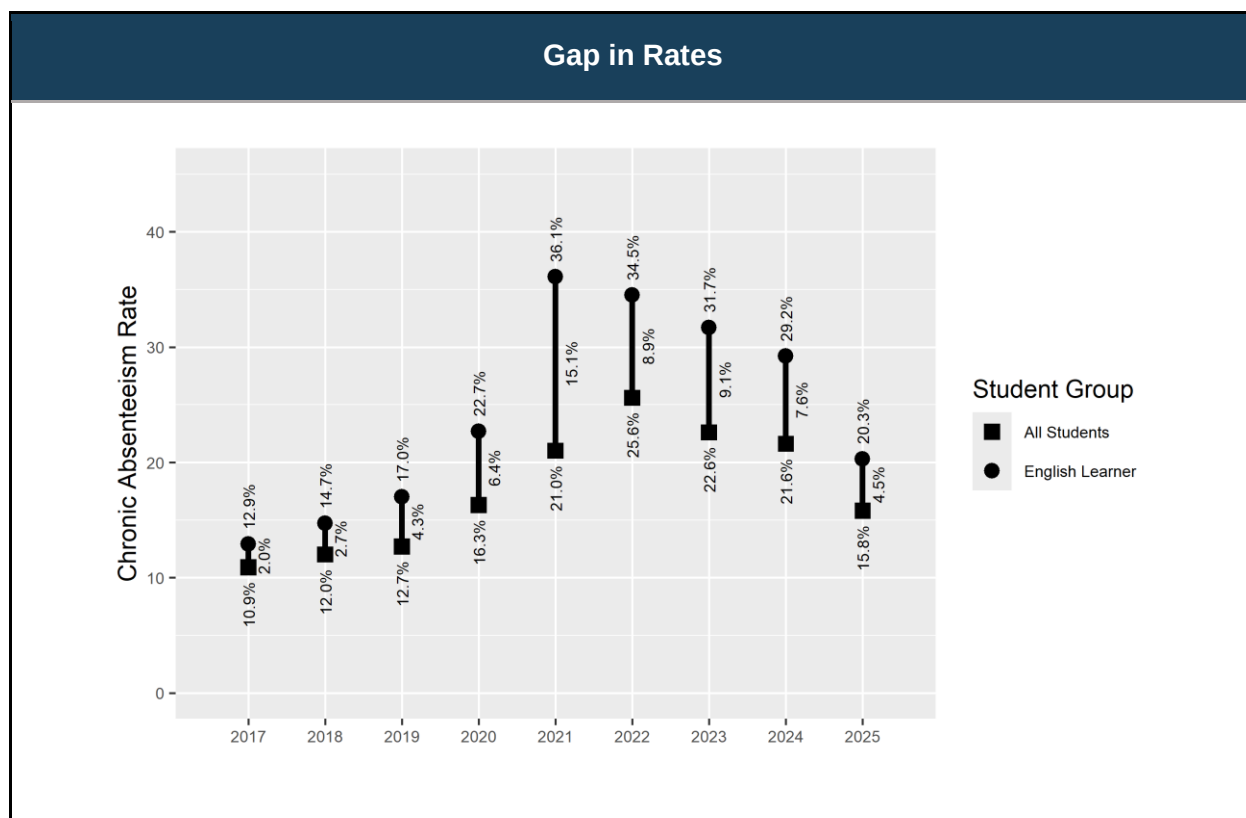
Figure 10: Chronic Absenteeism Rates – Students with Disabilities



The gap in absenteeism rates for English learners was much smaller pre-pandemic than during and after the pandemic. In 2016-17, the gap was 2 percentage points and increased slowly until reaching 15.1 percentage points in 2020-21. By the 2024-25 school year, the gap in rates narrowed to 4.5 percentage points, which was similar to the gap from the 2018-19 school year (4.3 percentage points). The peak of absenteeism rates for EL students (36.1%) was similar to

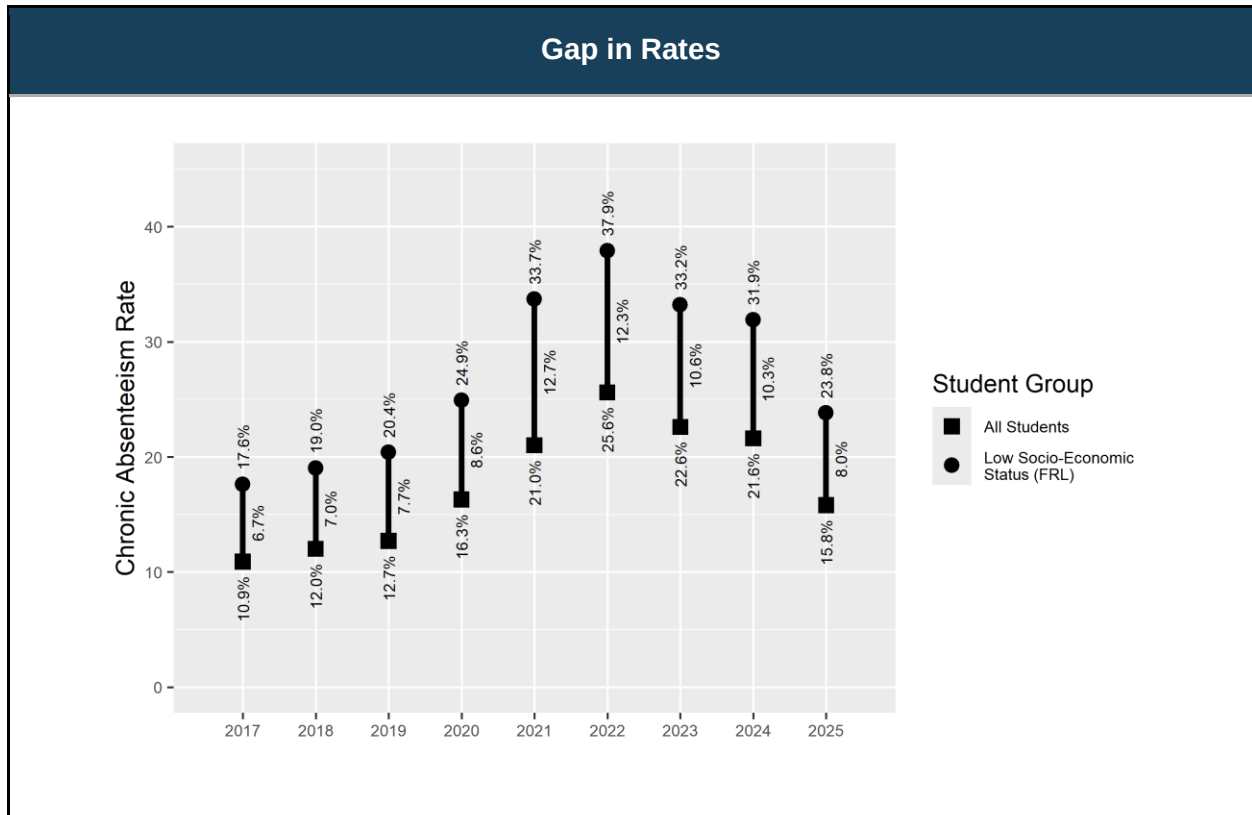
the rate for students with disabilities (35.4%). The gap was larger for English learners (15.1%) than for students with disabilities (10.3%), though, as the peak rate for English learners occurred a year earlier in 2020-21.

Figure 11: Chronic Absenteeism Rates – English Learners



The gap in absenteeism rates between students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch (FRL) is similar to the gap for students with disabilities. In 2016-17, the gap for FRL-eligible students was 6.7 percentage points compared to 6.9 percentage points for students with disabilities. This general pattern continued until the 2020-21 school year in which the gap for FRL-eligible students increased to 12.7 percentage points. Similar to English learners and students with disabilities, the gap in absenteeism rates for FRL-eligible students started to narrow post-pandemic. However, between these student groups, the gap remains the widest for FRL-eligible students (8.0 percentage points) compared to English learners (4.5 percentage points) and students with disabilities (7.5 percentage points).

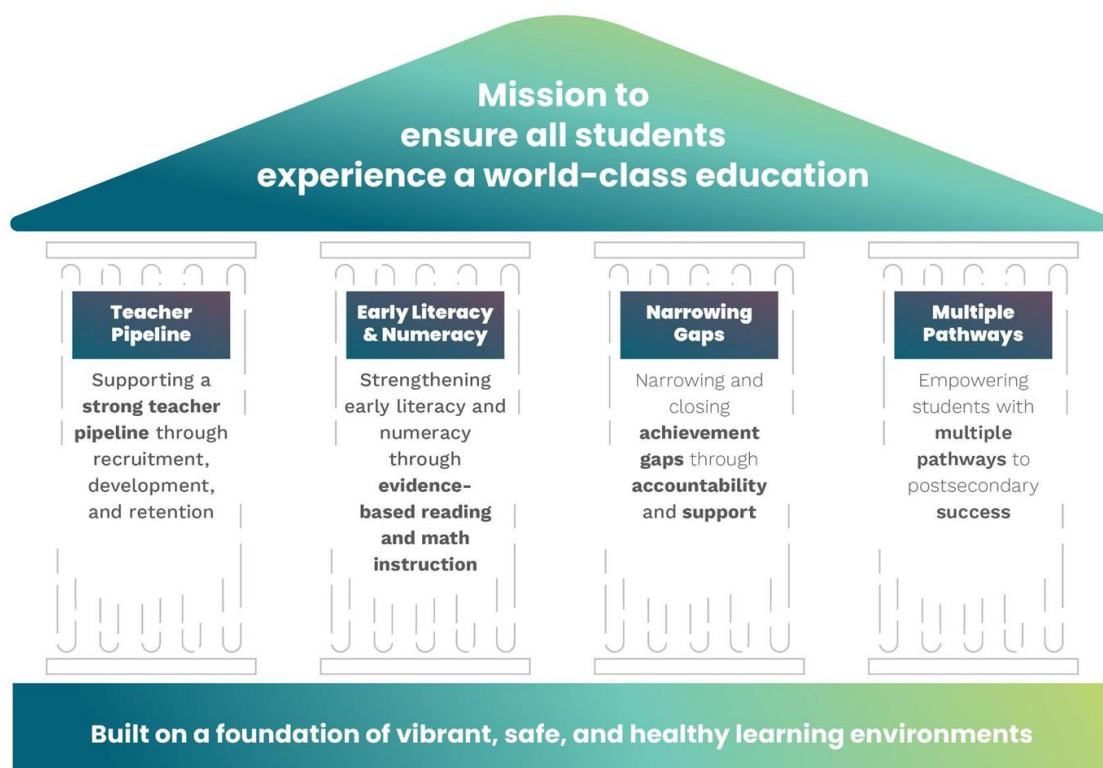
Figure 12: Chronic Absenteeism Rates – Students Eligible for Free or Reduced-Price Lunch



Activities to Close the Achievement Gap

The Department of Education has a bold vision of education for Iowa. The mission of the Department is to ensure all students experience a world-class education. Figure 13 outlines the strategic goals of the agency. It is important to note that *Narrowing Achievement Gaps* is one of the four main pillars, and numerous projects and ongoing work of agency staff are focused on this goal.

Figure 13: The Department of Education Vision and Strategic Goals



Under the Narrowing Gaps pillar, accountability and support activities include projects such as building a new accountability and support framework for Iowa districts and schools. Over the past two years, Department actions to Narrow and Close Achievement Gaps include:

- Implementing Iowa's transparent, unified accountability system that informs continuous improvement and celebrates school success.
- Developing and rolling out district-level performance scores and ratings.
- Supporting education leaders with school improvement support, evidence-based professional learning and information about and access to high-quality instructional materials.
- Providing intensive, district-wide support to districts with a concentration of comprehensive (CSI)-identified schools.
- Supporting continuous improvement in districts where students with disabilities experience significant achievement gaps, statewide special education webinar series and family support.

- Implementing a review and revision process for all state content standards at least every five years.

Over the past two years, Iowa has implemented a cohesive set of reforms driven by five key policy levers:

- **Lever 1: Unified Accountability and Improvement:** Launched in 2024, this system tracks proficiency, growth, and chronic absenteeism. By embedding school improvement experts directly into the field, we delivered **6,000+ hours of coaching**, yielding dramatic gains in our most high-need schools.
- **Lever 2: Early Literacy Advancements:** We have codified the **Science of Reading** through rigorous standards, evidence-based professional learning and family-centered resources.
- **Lever 3: Targeted Attendance Strategies:** Iowa introduced an innovative **attendance growth indicator** and established a statewide early warning system, supported by legislation to engage families and community partners early.
- **Lever 4: Postsecondary Pathways:** Our revamped readiness measures value multiple routes to success, including work-based learning, industry credentials, and dual enrollment college credits.
- **Lever 5: The UAP (A New Era):** The Unified Allocation Plan (UAP) dissolves traditional "funding silos" and cuts administrative red tape. By leveraging **ESEA section 8401 and Ed-Flex**, we are expanding local flexibility while maintaining high accountability standards.

As a result of these reform efforts, Iowa has seen remarkable gains across a number of key indicators including overall school performance, early literacy, attendance, work-based learning and low performing schools.

A priority for the Department is to support vibrant, safe and healthy learning environments. Iowa has a statewide focus on addressing chronic absenteeism and positive behavior support, leading to improved attendance. The average percent of chronically absent K-12 public school students dropped 5.8 percentage points last year. Over just the past three years, Iowa had a 9.8 percentage point decrease in chronic absenteeism, supported by:

- Prioritized chronic absenteeism and attendance growth in accountability system
- 2024 State Chronic Absenteeism Reduction Work Group
- Statewide professional learning
- Intensive supports for student engagement at schools in need
- Early warning system for students at risk of becoming chronically absent
- 2024 legislation to support statewide family notices, engagement meetings, prevention plans, and county attorney partnerships

Iowa has taken a comprehensive, prevention-focused approach to reducing chronic absenteeism by aligning policy, providing near real-time attendance data and intervention support across schools, families, and communities. The state has strengthened attendance laws and expectations, including defining chronic absenteeism as missing 10% or more of school days, establishing a consistent statewide school attendance reporting policy and implementing 2024 legislation to statewide family notices, engagement meetings, Absenteeism Prevention Plans identifying barriers to attendance and corresponding interventions and county attorney partnerships. Schools are expected to address attendance through a multi-tiered system of

supports (MTSS), using data to monitor trends, implement universal strategies that build belonging and engagement and provide targeted or intensive support. Iowa is also emphasizing early warning systems, regular communication with families and collaboration with local partners to address underlying challenges such as academic progress and success, basic needs, physical health, transportation, housing insecurity, mental and/or behavioral health, challenging behaviors and school connectedness. Iowa has developed clear policy and prioritized evidence-based practices with high-needs schools. These efforts are paired with greater transparency and public reporting of attendance data to drive continuous improvement. As a result of this coordinated statewide focus, Iowa has seen measurable progress, with chronic absenteeism declining.

Iowa is also partnering with schools and districts across the state to implement CHAMPS, a research-based classroom management and positive behavior framework that supports strong learning environments and student engagement. CHAMPS helps educators establish clear expectations for behavior and academic routines and transitions so students understand what success looks like in every setting. Through professional learning, coaching, and integration with Iowa's broader MTSS, Iowa is building educator capacity to create safe, consistent and predictable classrooms. This work is focused on reducing disruptions, increasing instructional time, strengthening relationships and improving both academic and behavioral outcomes for all students, particularly those who need additional support. By scaling CHAMPS across districts, Iowa is advancing a proactive, prevention-focused approach that supports positive school culture and keeps students engaged in learning.

Iowa is committed to supporting strong, seamless transitions across the education continuum from early childhood through postsecondary opportunities to reduce the risk of students disengaging or dropping out, particularly in the middle grades and high school. The Iowa Department of Education partners with local education agencies (LEAs) receiving Title I, Part A funds to implement coordinated, evidence-based strategies that strengthen academic, behavioral and engagement support at critical transition points. While all middle and high schools benefit from these statewide efforts, the Department provides additional technical assistance, coaching and professional learning to Title I schools to ensure equitable access, strong student engagement and successful transitions.

Iowa's approach is grounded in a statewide MTSS framework embedded within the Differentiated Accountability and Support System. This system emphasizes early identification of student needs, targeted and intensive interventions and continuous progress monitoring across academic, behavioral and attendance indicators. A key component of this work is the statewide implementation of Panorama Student Success, a comprehensive early warning system provided at no cost to all Iowa schools. Student Success enables middle and high schools to monitor real-time risk indicators, including grades, attendance and behavior incidents, allowing educators to identify students at risk of disengagement and implement timely, targeted supports such as mentoring, tutoring, counseling and credit recovery. The Department provides training and technical assistance to ensure schools use early warning data effectively to inform instruction, intervention, and continuous improvement.

In addition, Iowa has established clear expectations for proactive intervention. Schools are required to develop attendance support plans for students who are chronically absent, focused on identifying root causes, strengthening family engagement and connecting students and families to community-based supports. Schools must also implement intervention plans for students who are not meeting proficiency or benchmark expectations in literacy and mathematics. These plans are aligned to Iowa's MTSS framework and emphasize screening, progress monitoring, evidence-based instruction and ongoing adjustment of support to ensure students remain on track for success. The Department also prioritizes strong universal

instruction and student engagement as key levers in dropout prevention. Iowa is expanding access to high-quality instructional materials, Science of Reading–aligned and evidence-based math practices and evidence-based instructional strategies across content areas to ensure students experience rigorous learning that prepares them for postsecondary success.

Iowa’s newly adopted academic standards for literacy and mathematics further strengthen transitions by establishing clear, grade-level expectations and learning progressions that prepare students for success in middle school, high school and postsecondary pathways. These standards are aligned with the Science of Reading and evidence-based mathematics practices, ensuring that students develop strong foundational and advanced skills that reduce the need for remediation and support successful completion of rigorous coursework.

To further strengthen transitions, Iowa supports schools in developing comprehensive systems for attendance and engagement, including prevention-focused approaches to chronic absenteeism, positive behavior frameworks such as CHAMPS or PBIS and structured student relationship-building practices. Schools are also supported in strengthening advisory systems, student voice and leadership opportunities and educational environment initiatives that foster belonging and connection—critical factors in persistence and graduation.

Iowa’s efforts are also aligned with statewide career and postsecondary readiness initiatives, including Future Ready Iowa, career-connected learning and expanded access to career and technical education (CTE), work-based learning and dual enrollment opportunities. These initiatives help students see clear pathways beyond high school and are especially impactful in supporting transitions into and through the middle and high school years.

Instructional coaches, teacher leaders and school counselors play central roles in monitoring student progress, supporting educators and strengthening family engagement. In addition, Iowa continues to prioritize family and community partnerships, ensuring that students and families are supported as they navigate transitions between grade spans and educational settings.

Finally, Iowa is leveraging new flexibility through the Unified Allocation Plan SEA block grant to strengthen coherence across federal programs and expand statewide professional learning in the Science of Reading and English learner supports. These efforts will further strengthen middle and high school transitions by improving literacy outcomes, increasing engagement and ensuring all students, particularly those experiencing achievement gaps, have access to the supports needed to graduate prepared for postsecondary success.

Conclusion

This report, submitted by the Iowa Department of Education to the state legislature, outlines Iowa's progress in narrowing achievement gaps. While the state has celebrated "remarkable results" across a number of key measures over the past two years, significant disparities remain for high-need student groups.

Over the past two decades, there has been a significant change in the demographics of students who attend Iowa public schools. Iowa schools are now more racially and ethnically diverse than at any other time in our history. In fall 2025, nearly one-third (30.2%) of students in Iowa schools were students of color. Overall eligibility for free or reduced-price lunch (FRL) has remained stable at roughly 42%. Enrollment projections suggest that the trend of increasing student diversity will continue.

This report shows both areas of strength as well as opportunities for improvement when examining the latest achievement results. The Department highlights several key indicators including:

- **School Performance:** Nearly 56% of schools now rank in the top three rating categories, a 10 percentage point jump from the previous year.
- **Early Literacy:** Fourth-grade ELA proficiency rates for students who were third-graders in the prior year increased by 11 percentage points following the 2024 Science of Reading legislation.
- **Chronic Absenteeism:** The statewide rate dropped by 5.8 percentage points in a single year, landing at 15.8%.
- **Work-Based Learning:** 45% of the Class of 2025 participated in work-based learning experiences, a sizable 76% increase over two years.

While these results show significant strengths of Iowa's K-12 education system, this report also reveals that Iowa still struggles to support its most vulnerable learners:

- **Students with Disabilities:** Iowa has the 3rd largest performance gap in the nation for this group.
- **English Learners (EL):** Iowa's gap is the 10th largest in the U.S.
- **FRL Students:** The achievement gap for students from low-income backgrounds ranks 25th nationally and effectively in the middle of the pack.

To make progress in closing the achievement gaps, the state is focusing on five policy levers:

- **Unified Accountability:** Using a transparent system to track growth and embed experts in high-need schools.
- **Science of Reading:** Training 6,600 educators in LETRS and providing decodable books to 38,000 first graders.
- **Attendance Strategies:** Implementing an early warning system and 2024 legislation to engage families earlier.
- **Postsecondary Pathways:** Expanding access to industry credentials and dual enrollment.
- **Unified Allocation Plan (UAP):** Reducing "funding silos" and administrative red tape to give districts more flexibility.

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