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DISCIPLINE, ABSENTEEISM, AND ACHIEVEMENT:
A DATA-DRIVEN LOOK AT COLORADO'S LARGEST SCHOOL DISTRICTS

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ABOUT COMMON SENSE INSTITUTE

Common Sense Institute is a non-partisan research organization dedicated to the protection and promotion of our economy. As a leading voice for free enterprise, CSI's mission is to examine the fiscal impacts of policies and laws and educate voters on issues that impact their lives.

CSI's founders were a concerned group of business and community leaders who observed that divisive partisanship was overwhelming policy-making and believed that sound economic analysis could help people make fact-based and *common sense* decisions.

CSI employs rigorous research techniques and dynamic modeling to evaluate the potential impact of these measures on the Colorado economy and individual opportunity.

TEAMS & FELLOWS STATEMENT

CSI is committed to independent, in-depth research that examines the impacts of policies, initiatives, and proposed laws so that Coloradans are educated and informed on issues impacting their lives. CSI's commitment to institutional independence is rooted in the individual independence of our researchers, economists, and fellows. At the core of CSI's mission is a belief in the power of the free enterprise system. CSI's work explores ideas that protect and promote jobs and the economy, and the CSI team and fellows take part in this pursuit of academic freedom. The CSI team's work is informed by data-driven research and evidence.

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INTRODUCTION

In 2022, Colorado's legislature passed HB22-1376, requiring that schools submit student-level discipline data, including behavior violations and the consequences students received. The 2023–24 school year marked the first time this data was collected and made available.

This study includes data from the Colorado Department of Education (CDE) on the 21 largest school districts in Colorado and compares rates of behavior incidents, including bullying, various drug violations, and violent offenses. It also investigates how chronic absenteeism and high rates of behavior incidents are associated with poor student performance.

Districts with higher rates of behavior violations tend to perform worse on standardized tests. Chronic absenteeism and student violation rates are strong predictors of student performance, and districts that struggle with one area typically also struggle with the other. Addressing student behavior and absenteeism may be an important part of fostering academic success, based on patterns observed in the data.

KEY FINDINGS

Chronic Absenteeism Remains a Widespread Challenge

- **Over 28%** of students across the 21 largest districts were chronically absent in 2023–24.

- **Pueblo City 60** (43%) and **Adams-Arapahoe 28J** (Aurora Public Schools) (40%) had the highest rates.

- Though down from 35% in 2021–22, the rate of absenteeism remains elevated in urban and high-incident districts.

Behavioral Incidents Vary Widely and Concentrate in Specific Districts

- Harrison 2 had the highest behavioral incident rate at **389 per 1,000 students,** nearly **three times the average** of 137.

- Colorado Springs 11 and Greeley 6 also exceeded **200 incidents per 1,000 students.**

- In contrast, Boulder Valley reported just **26 incidents per 1,000 student,** the lowest among the 21 districts.

Violent and Substance Violations Are Heavily Skewed Toward a Few Districts

- Aurora Public Schools reported the most third-degree assaults (fights): **27 per 1,000 students,** 44% more than the next closest district.

- **Pueblo City 60** had the highest marijuana violation rate at **18.1 per 1,000 students,** nearly **three times the average across the state's 21 largest districts.**

- Drug violations averaged **1.3 per 1,000 students,** with Aurora Public Schools leading at **3.6.**

Poor School Climate Strongly Correlates with Academic Underperformance

- A strong negative correlation exists between student violation rate and SAT Math proficiency (**–0.72**) and between absenteeism and SAT Math proficiency (**–0.69**).

- Districts like Boulder Valley and Littleton 6, with low discipline and absenteeism, lead analyzed school districts in SAT proficiency.

- Districts with high absenteeism and behavior violations—like Pueblo and Aurora Public Schools—rank among the lowest in academic performance.

SCHOOL SAFETY OVERVIEW

Among the 21 largest school districts in Colorado, the rate of behavioral violations varies widely from 26 violations per 1,000 students in Boulder Valley RE-2, to 389 violations per 1,000 students in Harrison 2. Other worst performers include Colorado Springs 11, Greeley 6, and Pueblo City 60. School safety is critical to a productive learning environment and has been shown to influence student performance.[i]

Some data are suppressed to protect students' privacy, creating possible discrepancies in the numbers. Any count under four is automatically redacted by CDE. Districts are excluded from figures when they reported a suppressed value.

HB22-1376 requires schools to report each incident under only its most severe violation. Students committing multiple violations at once would therefore be undercounted, leading to fewer overall incidents.

FIGURE 1

Total Behavioral Incidents per 1,000 Students
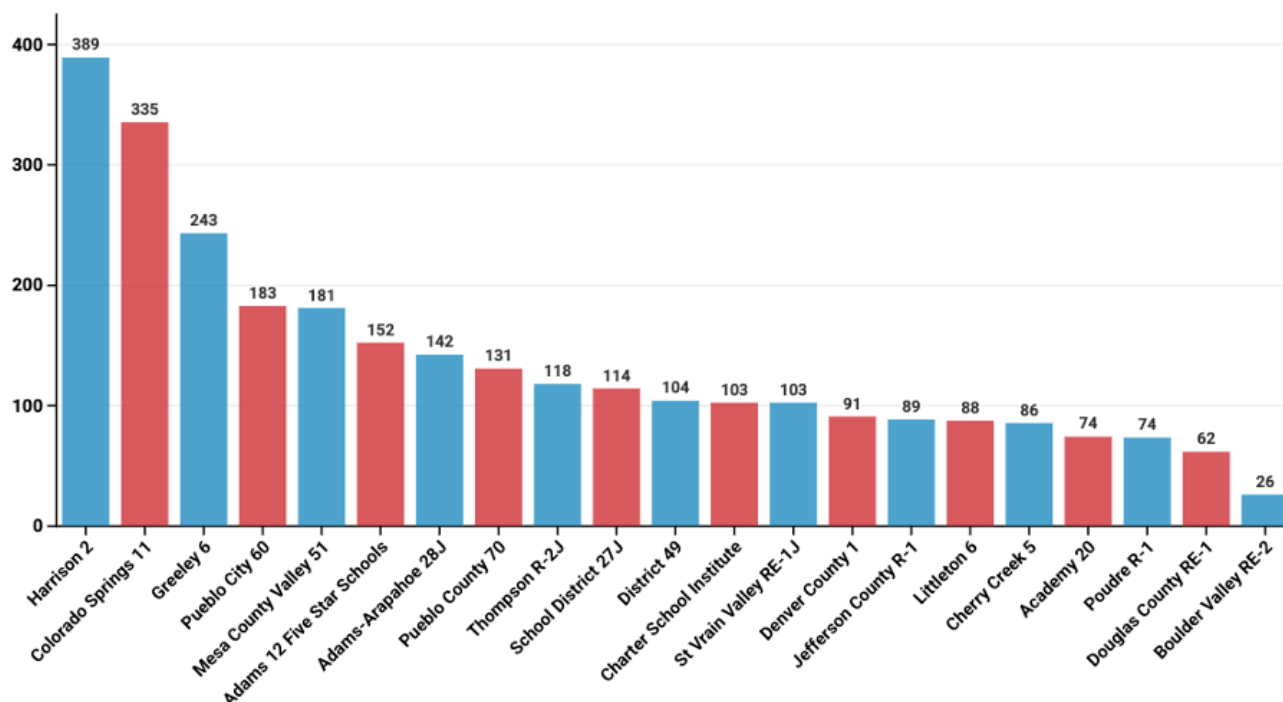
Two Colorado Springs–area school districts, Harrison 2 and Colorado Springs 11, consistently have the worst rate of behavioral incidents across the largest 21 school districts, according to state data.

There was an average of 137 incidents per 1,000 students across the 21 largest Colorado school districts. There are several outliers, with Harrison 2, Colorado Springs 11, and Greeley 6 all over 200 incidents per 1,000 students. Among the 21 largest districts in Colorado, Harrison 2 had almost three times the average incident rate.

VIOLENT INCIDENTS

Violent incidents include first- and second-degree assault, third-degree assault, and dangerous weapon incidents. First- and second-degree assault incidents are grouped together in CDE's dataset and are suppressed for most districts; so, the graph below shows only third-degree assaults. The worst performers include Aurora Public Schools, District 49, and Colorado Springs 11.

Violent incidents are of particular importance to school administrators, as they directly impact the well-being of students and can lead to more serious academic or legal consequences. Violent incidents also degrade the ability of teachers and school staff to foster a positive learning environment.

As seen in Figure 2, there is a large discrepancy of incidents across the largest districts. Aurora Public Schools had 27 3rd-degree assault incidents per 1,000 students, the most among the 21 districts analyzed and 44% more than the next closest, District 49. Boulder Valley School District only reported 0.4 3rd-degree assault incidents per 1,000 students. Across the 21 school districts analyzed, there were an average of 5.6 3rd degree assaults per 1,000 students.
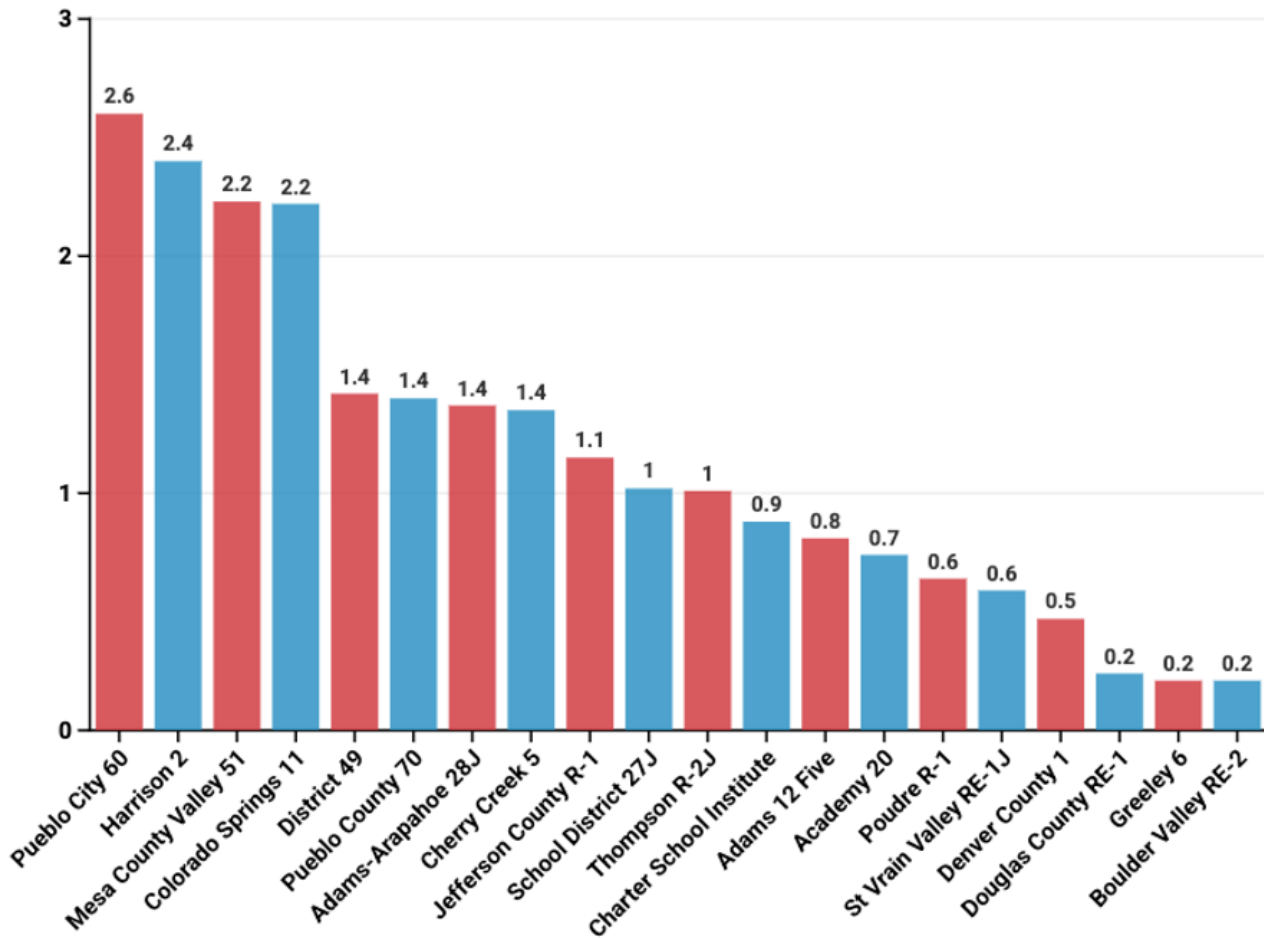
FIGURE 2

3rd-Degree Assault Incidents per 1,000 Students
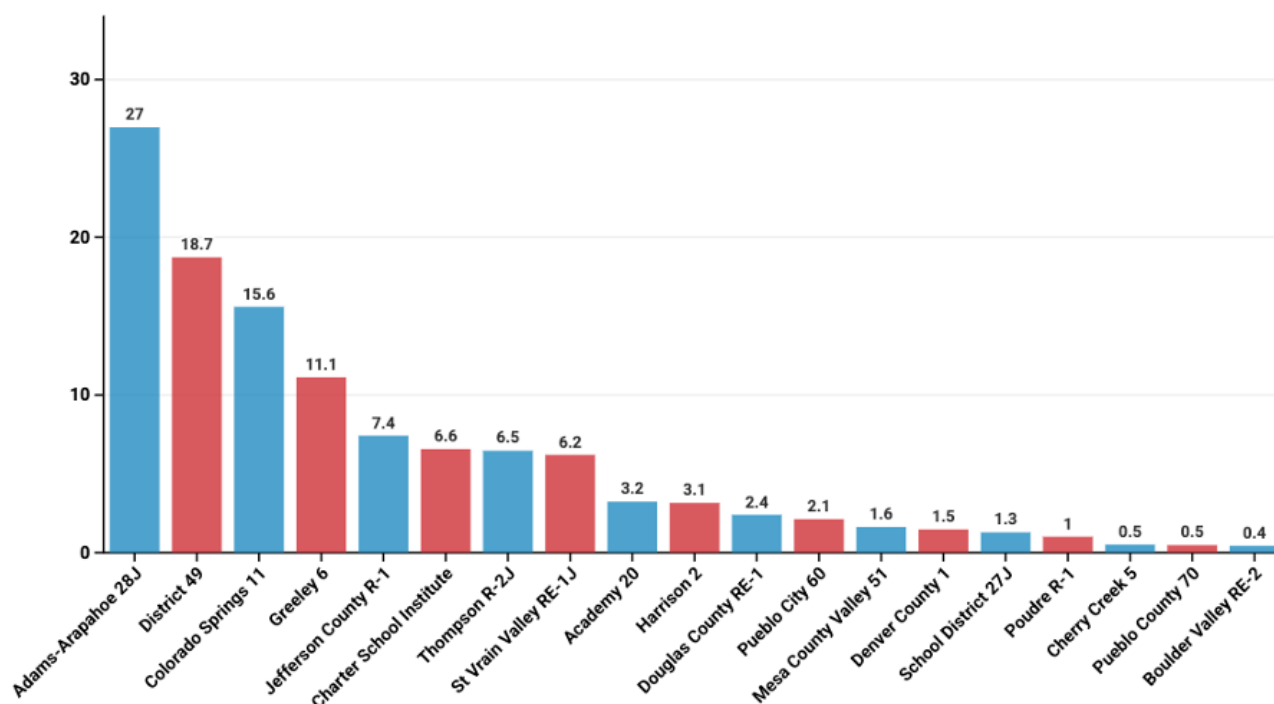
*Littleton 6 and Adams 12 Five Star Schools are not included due to data suppression

Dangerous Weapons Incidents per 1,000 Students

*Littleton 6 is not included due to data suppression

Four school districts have higher rates of dangerous weapons incidents compared to other districts, sitting at an average of 2.4 incidents per 1,000. Greeley 6, typically a high violation rate district had just 0.2 dangerous weapons incidents per 1,000 students.

The observed districts had an average of 1.1 dangerous weapons incidents per 1,000 students. Pueblo City 60 had 2.6 violations per 1,000 students, while Boulder Valley, Douglas County, and Greeley 6 only report 0.2 violations per 1,000 students.
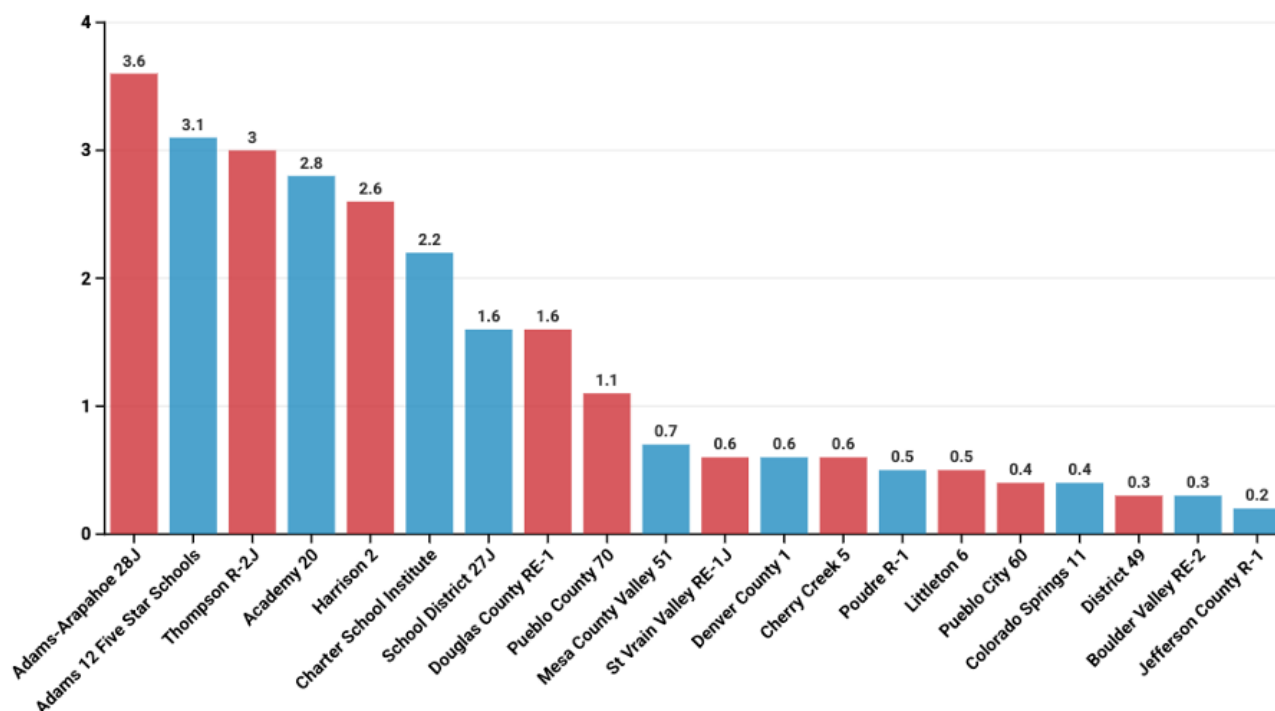
SUBSTANCE VIOLATIONS

Substance violations include the use, possession, or sale of a particular substance at school or a school-related function. Marijuana violations make up the largest portion of the substance violations on school grounds, while alcohol violations and drug violations make up relatively small shares.

Across all 21 districts analyzed, there was an average of 1.3 drug violations per 1,000 students. Adams-Arapahoe had the highest rate of drug violations—3.6 per 1,000 students—while Jefferson County reported only 0.2 per 1,000 students.

FIGURE 4

Drug Violation Incidents per 1,000 Students

District	Rate
Adams-Arapahoe 28J	3.6
Adams 12 Five Star Schools	3.1
Thompson R-2J	3
Academy 20	2.8
Harrison 2	2.6
Charter School Institute	2.2
School District 27J	1.6
Douglas County RE-1	1.6
Pueblo County 70	1.1
Mesa County Valley 51	0.7
St Vrain Valley RE-1J	0.6
Denver County 1	0.6
Cherry Creek 5	0.6
Poudre R-1	0.5
Littleton 6	0.5
Pueblo City 60	0.4
Colorado Springs 11	0.4
District 49	0.3
Boulder Valley RE-2	0.3
Jefferson County R-1	0.2

*Greeley 6 is not included due to data suppression

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Pueblo City 60, as well as Colorado Springs 11 and Greeley 6, take the top spots again, this time for marijuana violations.

Figure 5 shows the number of marijuana violations per 1,000 students, which averaged 6.3 across all school districts. Pueblo City 60 had almost three times that amount, 18.1 per 1,000 students, while Boulder Valley School District only had 1.1 per 1,000 students.

FIGURE 5

Marijuana Violation Incidents per 1,000 Students
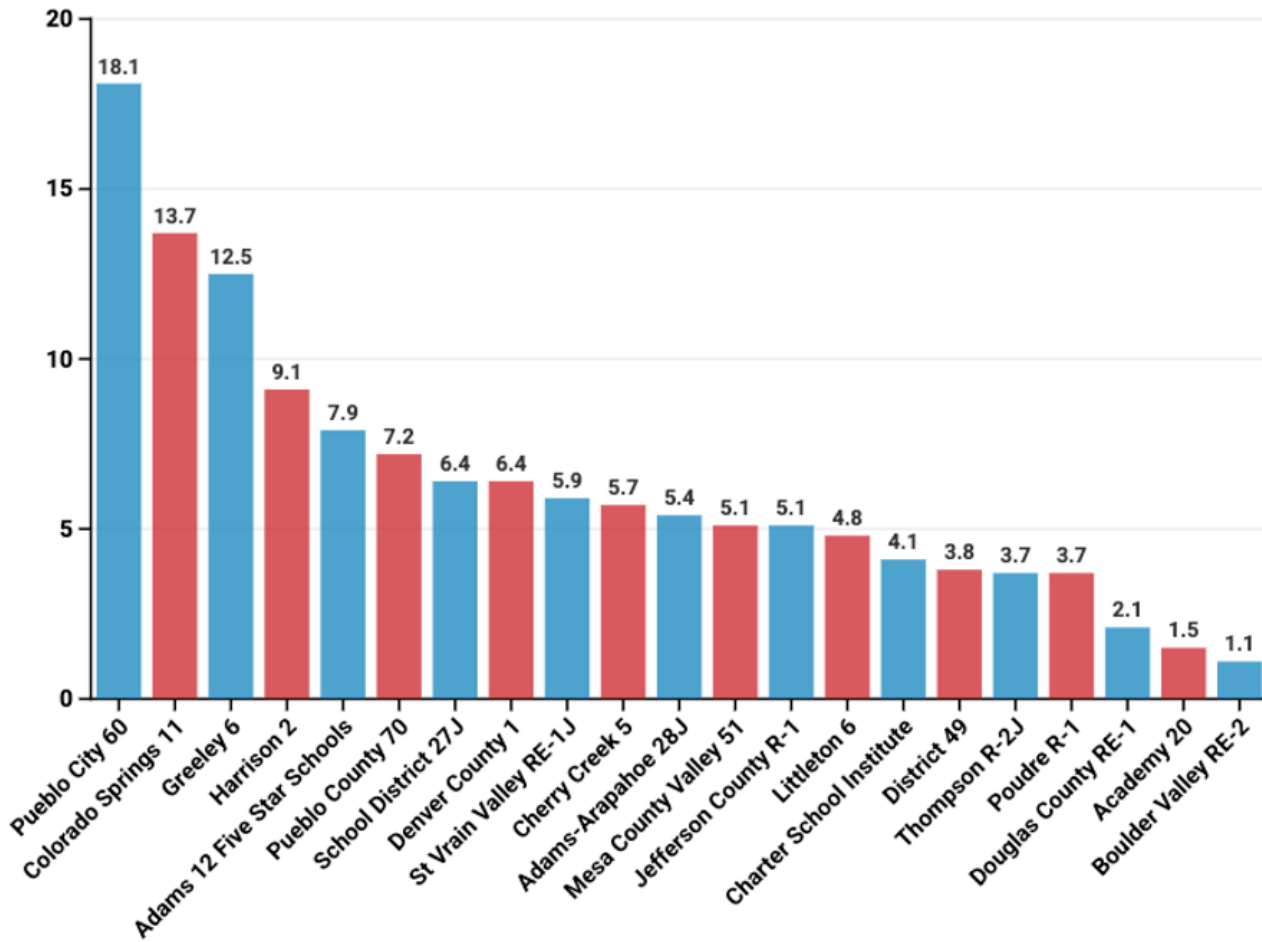
Among the largest school districts, the rate of alcohol violations is narrowly distributed.

There was an average of 1.1 alcohol violations per 1,000 students across school districts. Greeley 6 was an outlier, with an alcohol violation rate 63% above that of the next-closest district, Cherry Creek 5, typically a low-incident district.

FIGURE 6

Alcohol Violation Incidents per 1,000 Students
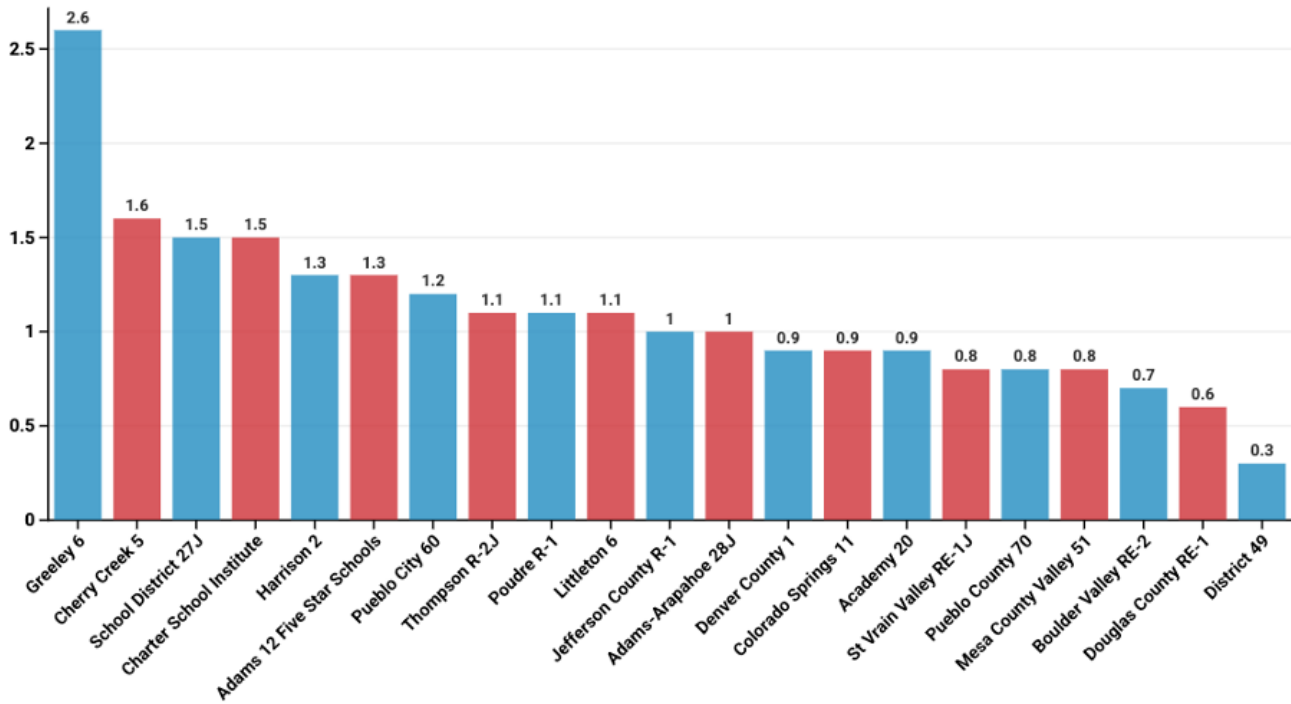
THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM, STUDENT VIOLATION RATES, AND TEST SCORES

Understanding the factors associated with a strong academic culture is key to improving school performance. Variables such as chronic absenteeism and high behavior incident rates are negatively correlated with test scores, suggesting that they may be important indicators of issues affecting student achievement.

FIGURE 7

Percent of Students Meeting or Exceeding Proficiency Standards, 2023–24						
District	PSAT 9 Math	PSAT 9 Reading	PSAT 10 Math	PSAT 10 Reading	SAT 11 Math	SAT 11 Reading
Academy 20	57.3%	83.8%	49.7%	83.4%	45.1%	77.8%
Adams 12 Five Star Schools	42.2%	63.3%	37.6%	64.9%	34.5%	55.9%
Adams-Arapahoe 28J	20.9%	39.1%	18.0%	42.5%	14.2%	30.0%
Boulder Valley RE-2	63.5%	85.5%	59.0%	88.1%	57.9%	81.2%
Charter School Institute	43.3%	70.5%	40.6%	73.6%	35.2%	64.0%
Cherry Creek 5	48.9%	75.1%	45.1%	77.3%	42.8%	69.7%
Colorado Springs 11	26.3%	53.8%	19.0%	54.0%	17.0%	45.1%
Denver County 1	33.2%	52.8%	31.4%	53.8%	27.6%	47.3%
District 49	24.9%	57.3%	16.3%	55.4%	12.2%	41.2%
Douglas County RE-1	55.5%	79.9%	47.0%	81.5%	45.2%	73.0%
Greeley 6	25.0%	47.2%	18.3%	46.8%	15.1%	38.1%
Harrison 2	32.6%	60.4%	25.0%	57.1%	26.5%	51.1%
Jefferson County R-1	49.7%	73.4%	42.9%	73.8%	40.0%	66.8%

|						
Littleton 6	64.8%	84.3%	51.2%	83.9%	49.6%	75.8%
Mesa County Valley 51	38.7%	67.2%	33.5%	70.1%	25.4%	57.6%
Poudre R-1	60.0%	82.9%	53.8%	83.7%	45.5%	72.6%
Pueblo City 60	14.7%	43.6%	10.9%	45.9%	9.8%	34.2%
Pueblo County 70	33.9%	67.9%	28.5%	64.1%	23.0%	53.0%
School District 27J	22.3%	55.6%	19.5%	62.0%	15.8%	48.6%
St Vrain Valley RE-1J	43.9%	70.2%	37.7%	70.7%	34.7%	64.0%
Thompson R-2J	39.0%	69.5%	32.9%	72.3%	26.1%	61.3%

Figure 8 below shows the correlation between SAT math performance and share of students with behavior violations.

Boulder Valley School District had a student violation rate of 2.1%, while Colorado Springs had a student violation rate eight times higher (16.7%). Boulder Valley School District also leads all school districts with 58% of its students meeting proficiency standards on SAT Math. Pueblo City 60 trailed, with less than 10% of students meeting proficiency standards.

FIGURE 8

Correlation Between Behavioral Incident Rate and Student Performance

A school district's position in the top left of the graph (Pueblo 60, Greeley 6, Colorado Springs 11) indicates that the district has a high rate of behavioral incidents and poor student performance. A position on the bottom right (Littleton 6, Boulder Valley RE-2) denotes low behavioral incidents and strong student performance.
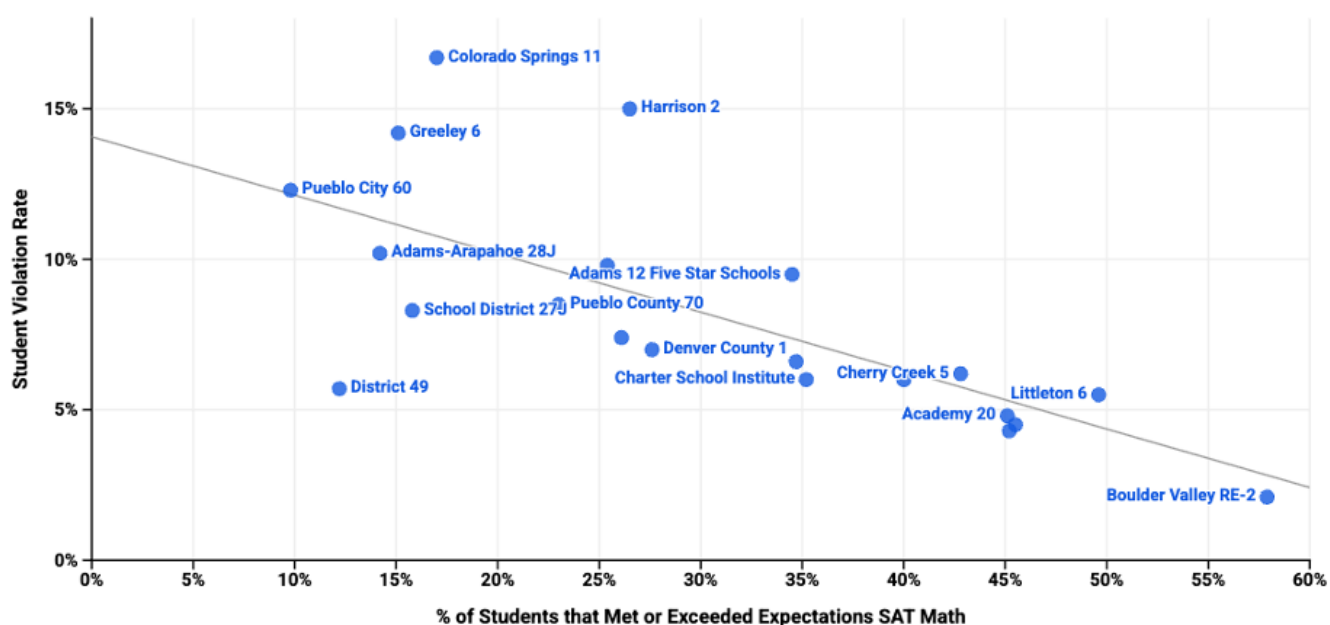
*Student Violation rate refers to the percentage of individual students who received disciplinary action in the 23-24 school year.

Schools with higher student violation rates consistently have lower test scores than those with lower rates.

Analysis of each district yielded a strong negative correlation coefficient of –0.72 between student violation rate and the percentage of students meeting or exceeding expectations on SAT math. A perfectly positive correlation has a correlation coefficient of 1, and a perfect negative correlation has a coefficient of –1. In this case, a negative correlation emerges, showing that when student violation rates are higher, test scores are typically lower. This relationship is consistent across PSAT and SAT tests.

FIGURE 9

Chronic Absenteeism Across School Districts, 2023–2024			
District Name	K–12 Student Count	Chronically Absent Count	Chronically Absent Rate
Academy 20	26,954	5,124	19.0%
Adams 12 Five Star Schools	35,831	11,133	31.1%
Adams-Arapahoe 28J	40,731	16,333	40.1%
Boulder Valley RE-2	28,220	5,025	17.8%
Charter School Institute	22,823	5,913	25.9%
Cherry Creek 5	53,208	13,584	25.5%
Colorado Springs 11	23,415	6,827	29.2%
Denver County 1	89,876	33,312	37.1%
District 49	26,806	7,196	26.8%
Douglas County RE-1	61,675	10,577	17.1%
Greeley 6	23,744	8,164	34.4%
Harrison 2	13,334	4,116	30.9%
Jefferson County R-1	75,442	19,123	25.3%
Littleton 6	13,132	2,123	16.2%
Mesa County Valley 51	20,219	7,108	35.2%
Poudre R-1	29,793	10,181	34.2%
Pueblo City 60	14,639	6,301	43.0%
Pueblo County 70	10,696	3,272	30.6%
School District 27J	23,427	6,288	26.8%
St Vrain Valley RE-1J	32,122	6,994	21.8%
Thompson R-2J	14,859	3,715	25.0%
Total of selected school districts	680,946	192,409	28.3%
Total Colorado:	**892,886**	**248,764**	**27.9%**

Across the 21 school districts analyzed, 28% of students were recorded as chronically absent. Districts have made improvements since 2021–2022, when 35% of students were chronically absent. Absentee rates continue to be above pre–COVID-19 numbers, which were 22.5% in 2018–2019. Colorado's average of 28% still remains well above the national average of 23.5%.[ii] The correlation between absenteeism and test scores is -0.69, which means that high rates of absenteeism are strongly associated with lower test scores.

FIGURE 10

Discipline and Chronic Absentee Rate

■ Student Violation Rate ■ Chronic Absentee Rate
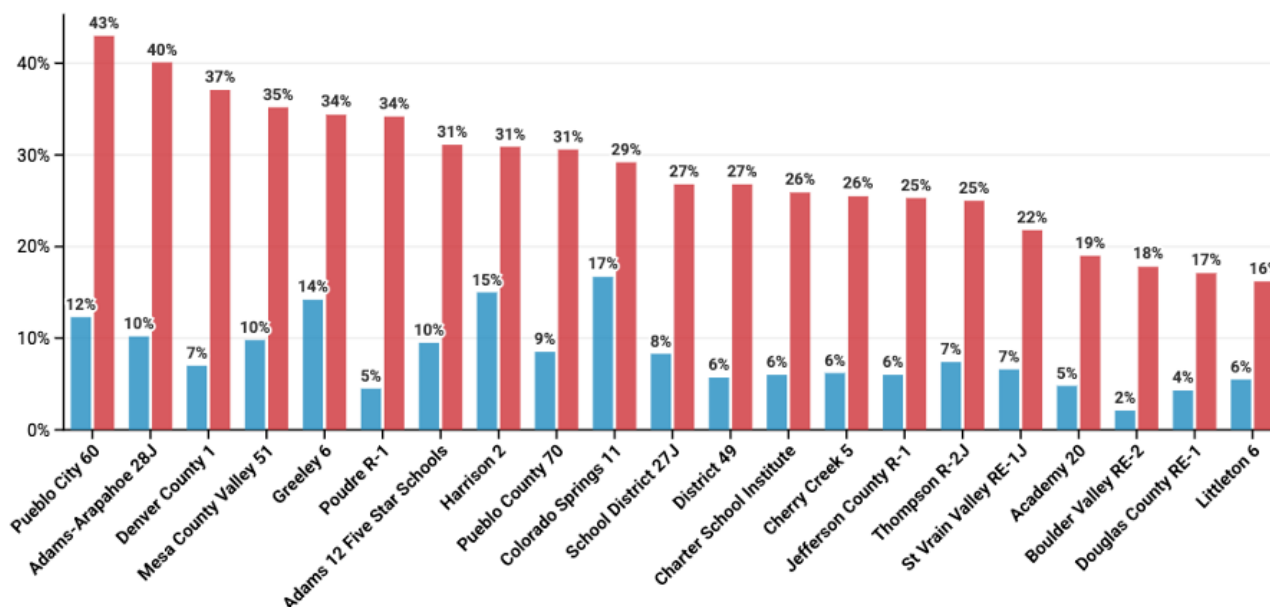
*Student Violation rate refers to the percentage of individual students who received disciplinary action in the 23-24 school year.

Though not a perfect match, districts with higher absentee rates are often those with higher violence rates. The top five districts have an average of 38% of students chronically absent and a 10.2% student violation rate, while the bottom five districts have an average absentee rate of 18% and a student violation rate of 4.7%.

The overall health of a district seems to be strongly correlated with these two factors, as school cultures with high rates of violence and absentee rates are those that typically do not do well on standardized tests. Although not certain, it is possible that many of the students with behavior incidents are also chronically absent. Certain districts remain outliers, with higher rates of violence and low rates of chronic absenteeism.

BOTTOM LINE

The passage of HB22-1376 and the data collection it authorized is a positive step to help school administrators and elected officials better understand the safety of Colorado's kids in their schools. This report highlights that school safety not only impacts the well-being of students in an immediate sense, but also plays a critical role in predicting a school's academic success and culture.

School districts with high rates of behavior violations, such as Pueblo City 60 and Greeley 6, are consistently near the bottom of student performance and chronic absentee rates. These trends suggest that addressing aspects of school culture may be an important part of addressing school performance trends.

It will be important for school officials to examine school safety trends in future years to ensure they are implementing policies that improve school safety, and ultimately student performance.

APPENDIX

Notable Behavior Violations per 1,000 Students

	1st/2nd Degree Assault	3rd degree Assault	Alcohol Violation	Bullying	Dangerous Weapons	Drug Violation	Marijuana Violation	Robbery
Academy 20	0.00	3.23	0.85	0.48	0.74	2.75	1.52	0.00
Adams 12 Five Star Schools	0.00	0.00	1.34	8.37	0.81	3.10	7.87	0.00
Adams-Arapahoe 28J	0.00	26.98	1.03	1.67	1.37	3.61	5.38	0.00
Boulder Valley RE-2	0.00	0.43	0.74	2.37	0.21	0.28	1.06	0.00
Charter School Institute	0.00	6.57	1.53	5.17	0.88	2.23	4.07	0.22
Cherry Creek 5	0.08	0.51	1.58	4.70	1.35	0.64	5.68	0.00
Colorado Springs 11	0.00	15.59	0.94	7.17	2.22	0.43	13.71	0.21
Denver County 1	0.16	1.47	0.91	5.56	0.47	0.62	6.36	0.00
District 49	0.41	18.73	0.34	4.70	1.42	0.26	3.77	0.82
Douglas County RE-1	0.15	2.40	0.55	0.00	0.24	1.61	2.09	0.00
Greeley 6	0.00	11.12	2.57	6.28	0.21	0.00	12.47	0.00
Harrison 2	4.27	3.15	1.27	1.42	2.40	2.62	9.07	0.00
Jefferson County R-1	0.08	7.42	0.98	4.88	1.15	0.24	5.10	0.00
Littleton 6	0.00	0.00	1.07	9.52	0.00	0.46	4.80	0.00
Mesa County Valley 51	0.25	1.63	0.84	1.93	2.23	0.74	5.09	0.00
Poudre R-1	0.00	1.01	1.07	1.64	0.64	0.54	3.73	0.00
Pueblo City 60	0.00	2.12	1.16	5.40	2.60	0.41	18.03	0.00
Pueblo County 70	0.00	0.47	0.84	3.74	1.40	1.12	7.20	0.00
School District 27J	0.00	1.28	1.49	0.00	1.02	1.58	6.40	0.00
St Vrain Valley RE-1J	0.00	6.20	0.84	1.31	0.59	0.56	5.85	0.00
Thompson R2-J	0.00	6.46	1.08	3.84	1.01	3.03	3.70	0.00

* First- and second-degree assault is categorized by commission of an act on school grounds that if committed by an adult, would be considered First Degree Assault, as described in Section 18-3-202, C.R.S., Second Degree Assault, as described in section 18-3-203, C.R.S., or Vehicular Assault, as described in Section 18-3-205, C.R.S.

* Bullying means any written or verbal expression, or physical or electronic act or gesture, or a pattern thereof, that is intended to coerce, intimidate, or cause any physical, mental, or emotional harm to any student.

* Robbery is categorized by commission of an act on school grounds that, if committed by an adult, would be considered robbery. Robbery is a class four felony.

* Third-degree assault is defined by: The person knowingly or recklessly causes bodily injury to another person or with criminal negligence the person causes bodily injury to another person by means of a deadly weapon; or the person, with intent to harass, annoy, threaten, or alarm another person whom the actor knows or reasonably should know to be a peace officer, a firefighter, an emergency medical care provider, or an emergency medical service provider, causes the other person to come into contact with blood, seminal fluid, urine, feces, saliva, mucus, vomit, or toxic, caustic, or hazardous material by any means, including throwing, tossing, or expelling the fluid or material.

* Drug violations are categorized by use, possession, or sale of a drug or controlled substance other than marijuana on school grounds, in school vehicles, or at school activities or sanctioned events.

* Marijuana violations are categorized by the unlawful use, possession, or sale of marijuana on school grounds, in a school vehicle, or at a school activity or sanctioned event.

* Alcohol violations are categorized by use, possession, or sale of alcohol on school grounds, in school vehicles, or at school activities or sanctioned events.

* Dangerous Weapons Violations are defined by: Carrying, bringing, using, or possessing a dangerous weapon on school grounds, in school vehicles, or at school activities or sanctioned events without the authorization of the school or the school district. A firearm, whether loaded or unloaded, any pellet or BB gun or other device, whether operational or not designed to propel projectiles by spring action or compressed air; a fixed blade knife with a blade that measures longer than three inches in length or a spring-loaded knife or a pocket knife with a blade longer than three and one-half inches; or any object, device, instrument, material, or substance, whether animate or inanimate, used or intended to be used to inflict death or serious bodily injury.

* Chronic absenteeism is defined as students who miss 10% or more of the school year.

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AUGUST 2025 // A DATA-DRIVEN LOOK AT COLORADO'S LARGEST SCHOOL DISTRICTS

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