

RHODE ISLAND KIDS COUNT

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**Testimony Re: House Bill 7195 Re: RELATING TO EDUCATION --
HEALTH AND SAFETY OF PUPILS**

House Education Committee

March 6, 2024

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Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today. Rhode Island KIDS COUNT would like to voice its strong support for House Bill 7195 and thank Chairman McNamara for sponsoring this bill and Representatives Noret, Giraldo, Batista, Rea, Kislak, Ackerman, Felix, Donovan, and Voas for co-sponsoring. This bill would institute a one-year pilot program for the 2024-2025 school year, bringing together the Department of Health, Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, State Office of Medicaid, and RI Data Hub. The program will target asthma and attendance issues at two public high schools and two public middle schools. Its findings and recommendations will be reported to the Governor and General Assembly by November 7, 2025.

Reducing chronic absence is important for improving high school graduation rates and increasing college and career readiness.

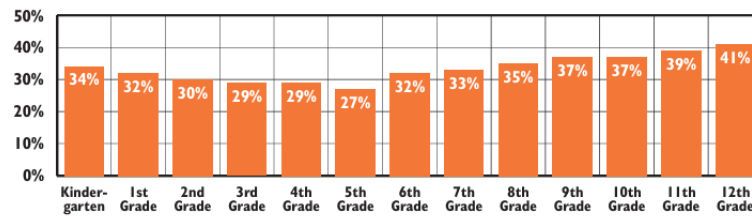
Students being present and engaged in learning daily matters. Young children are chronically absent from school for a variety of reasons. Asthma is a leading cause of school absenteeism, accounting for one-third of all absences, but other physical and behavioral health issues, including dental and vision problems, food insecurity, anxiety, and/or depression can also result in chronic absence.

While illness is a leading factor in chronic early absence, chronic absenteeism also can result from poor quality education, ambivalence about or alienation from school, and chaotic school environments, including high rates of teacher turnover or absenteeism, disruptive classrooms, and/or bullying. Unreliable or insufficient transportation, violence at and around school, multiple foster care placements, lack of clean or affordable clothes, and lack of safe and affordable housing are other factors that can lead to chronic absence.

In Rhode Island, chronic absence rates are high in kindergarten and first grade and then decline before increasing again in middle and high school. In the 2021-2022 school year, chronic absenteeism affected 34% of Rhode Island kindergarten students, 31% of first graders, 30% of second graders, and 29% of third graders, meaning they missed 10% or more of the school year (18 or more days in a 180-day school year). Additionally, 32% of sixth graders, 37% of ninth graders, and 41% of twelfth graders were chronically absent during the same period.



Chronic Absence Rates in Rhode Island by Grade, 2021-2022 School Year



Source: Rhode Island Department of Education, 2021-2022 school year.

The effect of the COVID-19 pandemic continues to impact attendance in the hardest-hit communities, particularly among students from low-income and communities of Color. In Rhode Island during the 2021-2022 school year, Native American (51%), Hispanic (49%), and Black (39%) K-12 students had higher rates of chronic absence than Asian (27%) and white (27%) students. Rates were also higher for Multilingual Learners (46%), low-income students (50%), and students with disabilities (43%) than for all students (35%).

Rhode Island KIDS COUNT supports the Governor's Attendance Matters campaign and serves on its related task force. We are dedicated to addressing the root causes of chronic absenteeism to ensure that all children are in school learning and thriving.

Thank you for the leadership that this Committee has shown in addressing chronic absence and related issues during this session and previous ones and for the opportunity to testify today.