



EARLY LEARNING FACT SHEET

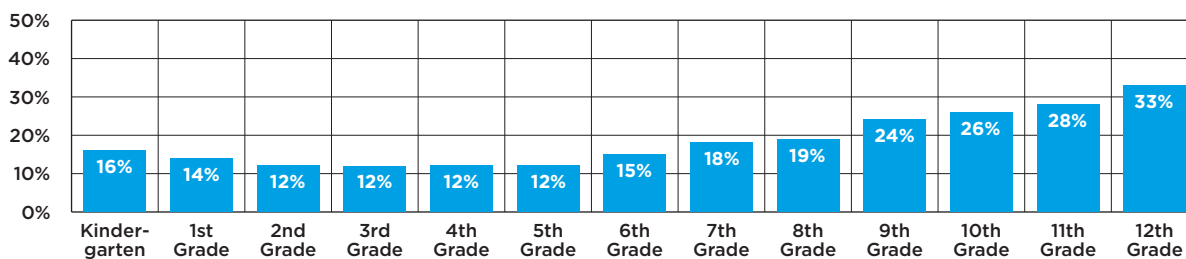
Promoting early learning and development Birth to 8

Focus on Reducing Chronic Early Absence

During the early elementary school years, children develop important academic and social-emotional skills and approaches to learning that are critical for school success. **Students who are chronically absent from school during these early years miss opportunities to learn** and develop positive relationships within the school community and are at risk of dropping out of high school.¹

There is a growing recognition nationally that average daily attendance does not tell the whole story and that schools, districts, and states should also track chronic absence rates. In fact, 36 states, including Rhode Island, and the District of Columbia have submitted *Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)* plans to the U.S. Department of Education that include a chronic absence measure in their accountability system.^{2,3}

CHRONIC ABSENCE RATES IN RHODE ISLAND BY GRADE, 2016-2017 SCHOOL YEAR



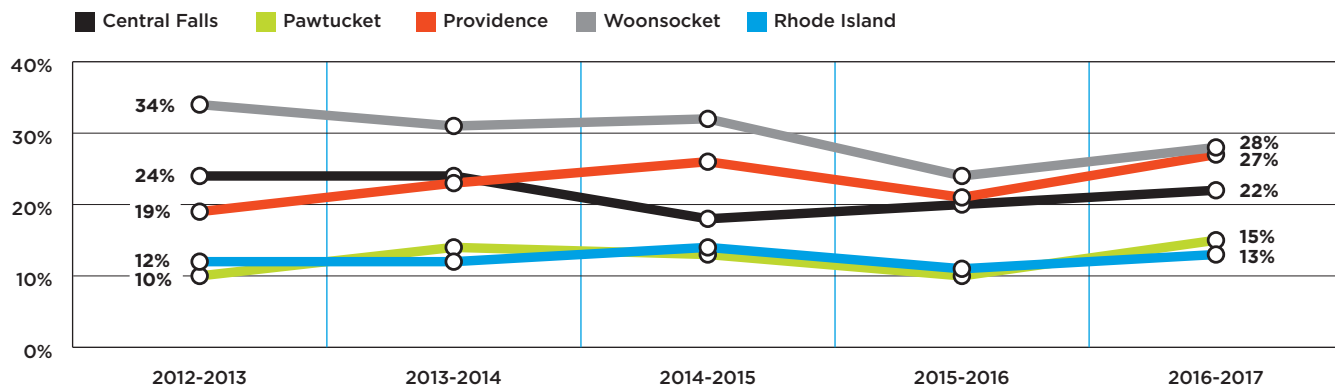
Source: Rhode Island Department of Education, 2016-2017 school year.

- Chronic absence is defined as missing 10% or more of the school year (18 or more days for a 180-day school year).⁴
- Chronic absence rates are high in kindergarten and then decline in early elementary school before increasing again in middle and high school. During the 2016-2017 school year, 16% of Rhode Island kindergarten students, 14% of first graders, 12% of second graders, and 12% of third graders were chronically absent.⁵
- Children in low-income families are much more likely to have high rates of chronic absence in the early grades than higher-income children. In Rhode Island, during the 2016-2017 school year, 19% of low-income K-3 students were chronically absent, compared to 5% of higher-income K-3 students.⁶
- Chronic early absence is often the result of a combination of school, family, and community factors. Chronic illness, unreliable or insufficient transportation, lack of clean or appropriate clothes, lack of safe or affordable housing, bullying, or ambivalence or alienation from school can all lead to chronic absence.^{7,8}

Act Early: Poor Attendance in September Can Predict Chronic Absence

A 2014 study of Baltimore students found that attendance patterns established in September persisted for the entire school year. Students who missed fewer than two days of school in September were absent an average of 10 days for the entire school year. In comparison, students who were absent two to four days were absent an average of 25 days, and students absent more than four days were absent an average of 70 days over the course of the school year.⁹

CHRONIC ABSENCE RATES, KINDERGARTEN THROUGH THIRD GRADE



Source: Rhode Island Department of Education, 2012-2013 through 2016-2017 school years. Chart includes data on the chronic absence rates for Rhode Island and the four core cities (the communities with the highest child poverty rates).

- The Rhode Island school districts with the highest chronic absence rates in the early grades have historically been those with the highest percentages of low-income students. Over the past five years, Pawtucket, where 61% of students are low-income, has had chronic early absence rates that are comparable to the state rate, despite having a much higher percentage of low-income students than the state as a whole (47%).¹⁰
- Despite an increased focus on chronic absence reduction in recent years, Rhode Island has not yet seen a sustained reduction in chronic absence in the early grades.¹¹

Recommendations

- Develop systems that provide *frequent reports on student absenteeism* at the state, district, and school levels. These reports should include breakdowns by subgroup (e.g., grade, special education status), analyze patterns of absenteeism (e.g., days of week, month of year), and identify individual students with troubling absenteeism patterns so appropriate strategies for intervention can be identified.
- Create *attendance teams* that monitor attendance regularly and contact parents as soon as troubling absence patterns appear. Intervene early to get students back on track before absences build up and students fall behind.
- Nurture a *culture of attendance* by helping parents understand the importance of coming to school on time and every day in the early grades and by partnering with families to address barriers to attendance.

References

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- ¹⁰ Rhode Island Department of Education, 2012-2013 through 2016-2017 school years.



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