

# School Attendance

## DEFINITION

*School attendance* is the average daily attendance of public school students in each school district in Rhode Island for middle school (grades 6-8), and high school (grades 9-12).

## SIGNIFICANCE

An important aspect of students' access to education is the amount of time actually spent in the classroom.<sup>1</sup> Truant students are at risk of disengagement from school, academic failure and dropping out.<sup>2</sup> Regardless of whether absences are unexcused or excused, students who miss school are more likely to fall behind academically and engage in risky behaviors.<sup>3,4</sup>

Nationally, 3% of eighth-graders and 5% of tenth-graders in the U.S. reported that they skipped three or more days of school in a four week period.<sup>5</sup> Students' reasons for not attending school include repeated suspensions, disruptive learning environments, poor achievement, concerns for safety, difficulty with peer and adult relationships, conflicts between school and work, family responsibilities and negative perceptions of school.<sup>6,7</sup>

Absenteeism is rarely a reflection of the student alone and is often an indication that the family needs help. Family and economic factors connected to student absenteeism include: poverty, substance abuse, domestic violence, foster care placements, student employment,

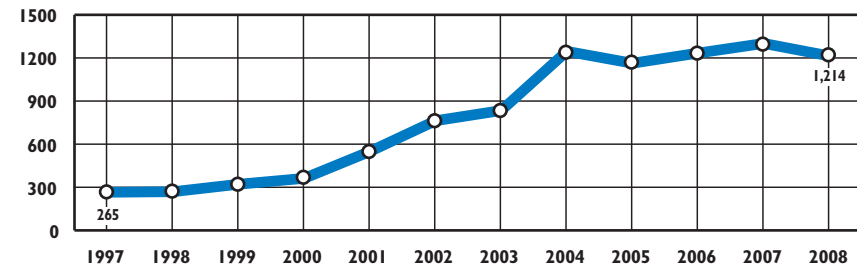
student disability, single-parent households, parents with multiple jobs, lack of affordable and reliable transportation and child care.<sup>8,9,10</sup>

School factors contributing to student absenteeism include school climate, school size, attitudes of school staff and discipline policies.<sup>11,12,13</sup> Policies and practices to increase student attendance include: providing free breakfast and lunch in schools with low attendance rates and high concentrations of low-income students, investing in out-of-school time programs, improving the reliability of transportation to and from school, streamlining school enrollment for students in foster care, and providing psychological services.<sup>14,15</sup>

During the 2008-2009 school year, almost half (45%) of middle and high school students in Rhode Island were absent for five or fewer days. A quarter (26%) of middle school students and a third (34%) of high school students were absent for 12 days or more.<sup>16</sup>

Attendance rates in the core cities are lower than in the remainder of the state. Improving the core cities' high school attendance rate from the current rate of 87% to 93% (the rate in the remainder of the state) would mean that on average 890 more students would be attending high school in the core cities each day of the school year.<sup>17</sup>

Students Charged with Truancy in Rhode Island Family Court and Truancy Court, 1997-2008



Source: Rhode Island Family Court, Intake Charges, 1997-2008.

◆ The U.S. Department of Education and the Rhode Island Department of Elementary and Secondary Education define truancy as 10 or more unexcused absences in a school year.<sup>18,19</sup> Truant students in Rhode Island may be referred by school administrators to the Rhode Island Truancy Court. The goal of the Truancy Court is to work with families, schools and communities to address the individual causes of truancy through monitoring, counseling, tutoring and other support services for students.<sup>20</sup>

◆ The number of Rhode Island students charged with truancy more than quadrupled between 1997 and 2008, from 265 students to 1,214 students.<sup>21</sup>

## Effective Truancy-Reduction Strategies

◆ School connectedness plays an important role in student attendance.<sup>22</sup> An open, supportive, safe and engaging school environment and caring adults can address many of the causes of truancy.<sup>23,24</sup>

◆ Effective truancy-reduction strategies include: creating community and school partnerships to get students to school, using challenging and creative school curricula, developing discipline policies that keep students in school, providing art, music, physical education and other high-interest classes, and implementing credit recovery programs.<sup>25,26,27</sup>

◆ Discipline policies that ensure the uniform use of suspensions and expulsions when appropriate and enable the use of alternative interventions to address the root causes of truancy and reward positive behavior are also important for reducing truancy rates.<sup>28</sup>

Table 48. Student Absence and School Attendance Rates, Rhode Island, 2008-2009 School Year

SCHOOL DISTRICT	MIDDLE SCHOOL				HIGH SCHOOL			
	TOTAL # OF STUDENTS	% OF STUDENTS ABSENT 12-17 DAYS	% OF STUDENTS ABSENT 18+ DAYS	ATTENDANCE RATE	TOTAL # OF STUDENTS	% OF STUDENTS ABSENT 12-17 DAYS	% OF STUDENTS ABSENT 18+ DAYS	ATTENDANCE RATE
Barrington	808	10%	5%	97%	1,163	9%	5%	96%
Bristol Warren	795	16%	12%	95%	1,151	17%	23%	92%
Burrillville	529	16%	9%	96%	840	19%	13%	94%
Central Falls	791	17%	17%	94%	838	17%	39%	86%
Chariho	1,110	15%	6%	96%	1,221	14%	15%	93%
Coventry	1,259	9%	3%	95%	1,810	0%	<1%	96%
Cranston	1,726	14%	11%	94%	3,548	14%	24%	92%
Cumberland	1,240	13%	6%	96%	1,588	14%	22%	92%
East Greenwich	404	11%	5%	96%	770	3%	3%	95%
East Providence	1,294	14%	19%	94%	1,967	5%	5%	89%
Exeter-West Greenwich	330	7%	3%	97%	642	13%	11%	95%
Foster-Glocester	568	1%	0%	96%	863	3%	2%	93%
Jamestown*	201	7%	8%	96%	NA	NA	NA	NA
Johnston	830	18%	21%	93%	903	17%	25%	92%
Lincoln	883	11%	8%	96%	1,039	14%	18%	93%
Little Compton*	107	0%	0%	95%	NA	NA	NA	NA
Middletown	746	11%	5%	96%	651	13%	10%	95%
Narragansett	478	13%	3%	92%	476	11%	9%	86%
New Shoreham	39	0%	0%	93%	28	3%	0%	91%
Newport	497	17%	26%	92%	588	20%	35%	88%
North Kingstown	1,026	<1%	<1%	96%	1,629	8%	4%	93%
North Providence	792	16%	9%	95%	1,061	19%	19%	92%
North Smithfield	460	10%	6%	96%	577	13%	11%	95%
Pawtucket	1,409	16%	18%	93%	2,366	16%	33%	89%
Portsmouth	673	10%	9%	96%	1,043	9%	10%	95%
Providence	4,494	16%	27%	91%	7,362	15%	43%	85%
Scituate	420	9%	6%	96%	529	11%	13%	95%
Smithfield	613	13%	6%	98%	853	16%	19%	95%
South Kingstown	869	12%	6%	95%	1,173	12%	13%	93%
Tiverton	611	18%	9%	95%	643	22%	10%	94%
Warwick	1,789	16%	11%	95%	3,481	15%	23%	92%
West Warwick	793	14%	19%	93%	1,105	12%	26%	90%
Westerly	795	4%	<1%	96%	1,058	14%	12%	93%
Woonsocket	1,357	NA**	NA**	91%	1,769	NA**	NA**	88%
<i>Charter Schools</i>	296	5%	5%	95%	338	0%	0%	90%
<i>State-Operated Schools</i>	32	0%	0%	94%	1,615	10%	13%	92%
<i>UCAP</i>	140	14%	34%	91%	NA	NA	NA	NA
<i>Core Cities</i>	9,341	16%**	24%**	92%	14,028	15%**	39%**	87%
<i>Remainder of State</i>	21,395	12%	8%	95%	30,707	12%	14%	93%
<i>Rhode Island</i>	31,204	13%**	13%**	94%	46,688	13%**	21%**	91%

\*\* Data for Woonsocket were not available. Therefore, only five of the six core cities are included in the core cities calculation: Central Falls, Newport, Pawtucket, Providence, and West Warwick. Woonsocket was also excluded from the Rhode Island calculation.

### Source of Data for Table/Methodology

Rhode Island Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2008-2009 school year.

Attendance rates are calculated by dividing “the average daily attendance” by the “average daily membership.”

Note that these numbers may not include some children who miss more than 18 days of school but who are officially un-enrolled in one district and have not yet enrolled in another district. This sometimes happens when children are homeless, live in unstable living situations, transitioning from an out-of-home placement (juvenile justice, foster care, residential or hospital placement), or miss school due to extended travel out of state or out of the country.

\*Little Compton students attend high school in Portsmouth and Jamestown students attend high school in North Kingstown.

Core cities are Central Falls, Newport, Pawtucket, Providence, West Warwick and Woonsocket.

Charter schools include BEACON Charter School, Blackstone Academy Charter School, The Compass School, CVS Highlander Charter School and Paul Cuffee Charter School. State-operated schools include The Rhode Island Training School operated by DCYF, Metropolitan Regional Career & Technical Center, and William M. Davies Jr. Career & Technical High School. UCAP is the Urban Collaborative Accelerated Program.

### References

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- <sup>2,26</sup> Kilma, T., Miller, M. & Nunlist, C. (2009). *Truancy and dropout programs: Interventions by Washington's school districts and community collaborations* (Document No. 09-06-2202). Olympia, WA: Washington State Institute for Public Policy.
- <sup>4,15</sup> Eaton, D. K., Brener, N. & Kann, L. K. (2008). Associations of health risk behaviors with school absenteeism. Does having permission for absence make a difference? *Journal of School Health*, 78(4), 223-229.
- <sup>5</sup> Henry, K. L. (2007). Who's skipping school: Characteristics of truants in 8th and 10th grade. *Journal of School of Health*, 77(1), 29-35.

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