

Chronic Early Absence

DEFINITION

Chronic early absence is the percentage of children in kindergarten through third grade (K-3) who were enrolled for at least 90 days and missed 18 days or more of school, including excused and unexcused absences (10% or more of the school year for a 180-day school year).

SIGNIFICANCE

Students who are absent from school miss opportunities to learn and develop the important academic and social-emotional skills and approaches to learning that are part of the K-3 experience and critical for ongoing school success. Children who are chronically absent in kindergarten show lower assessment scores in math, reading, and general knowledge in first grade. Chronic absence in kindergarten appears to be especially detrimental for children living in poverty and Latino children who are less likely to have the resources to make up for lost time in the classroom.^{1,2} In Rhode Island, children who are chronically absent in kindergarten have lower scores on assessments as far out as the seventh grade and are more than twice as likely to be retained.³

Nationally in the 2017-2018 school year, 12% of all elementary school students were chronically absent.⁴ In the early grades, children from families living in poverty are much more likely to be

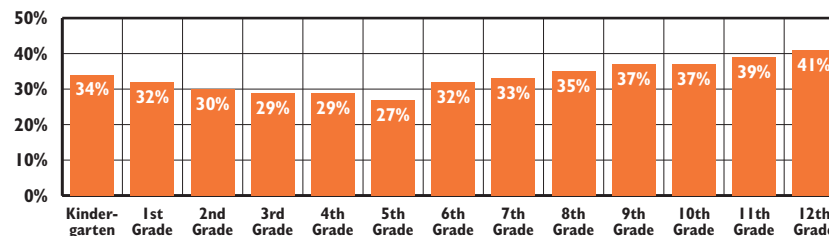
chronically absent than higher-income children. In the U.S., one in five (21%) poor kindergartners was chronically absent, compared to less than one in 10 (8%) of their higher-income peers.⁵ The rate of chronic absence is twice as high for students experiencing homelessness as it is for the general student population.⁶ Chronic absenteeism can affect the reading and math outcomes of all students in a class, not just those who are absent, because teachers may backtrack or slow the learning pace to review lessons for students who have missed school.⁷

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.^{8,9}

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.^{10,11,12}



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



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

◆ **Chronic absence rates are high in kindergarten and first grade and then decline before increasing again in middle and high school. During the 2021-2022 school year, 34% of Rhode Island kindergarten students, 32% of first graders, 30% of second graders, and 29% of third graders were chronically absent (i.e., absent 18 days or more). Thirty-one percent of all Rhode Island children in grades K-3 were chronically absent.**¹³

◆ **Averages for school-wide attendance can mask significant numbers of chronically absent individual students.**¹⁴ During the 2021-2022 school year, the average daily attendance rate for K-3 students in Rhode Island's four core cities was 88%, but 47% of students were chronically absent.¹⁵



Reducing Student Chronic Absence

◆ **Schools, districts, and community partners can nurture a culture of attendance by increasing the feelings of belonging and connection for all students and families, raising awareness about the problem of chronic absence, encouraging parents to send their children to school every day in the early grades, developing a community response that involves mentoring outside of school, and recognizing and rewarding good attendance.**^{16,17,18}

◆ **States can also incorporate chronic absence measures into early warning and accountability systems and school improvement efforts and can allocate resources to tracking chronic absence data and addressing barriers to attendance.**^{19,20}

Table 50. Chronic Early Absence Rates, Grades K-3, Rhode Island, 2021-2022 School Year

SCHOOL DISTRICT	K-3 STUDENTS ENROLLED LESS THAN 90 DAYS	K-3 STUDENTS ENROLLED 90 DAYS OR MORE	K-3 ATTENDANCE RATE	% OF K-3 STUDENTS ABSENT 0-5 DAYS	% OF K-3 STUDENTS ABSENT 6-11 DAYS	% OF K-3 STUDENTS ABSENT 12-17 DAYS	% OF K-3 STUDENTS ABSENT 18+ DAYS
Barrington	19	919	95%	32%	38%	19%	10%
Bristol Warren	41	820	92%	19%	32%	21%	27%
Burrillville	29	576	94%	28%	35%	22%	15%
Central Falls	91	736	90%	18%	25%	20%	37%
Chariho	41	843	92%	17%	33%	26%	24%
Coventry	44	1,182	93%	27%	35%	20%	19%
Cranston	170	2,823	93%	30%	31%	19%	20%
Cumberland	86	1,344	95%	41%	35%	14%	10%
East Greenwich	13	712	94%	30%	39%	19%	12%
East Providence	85	1,377	94%	32%	33%	20%	16%
Exeter-West Greenwich	19	413	93%	21%	34%	21%	25%
Foster	*	136	95%	35%	38%	16%	11%
Glocester	16	379	94%	35%	37%	16%	11%
Jamestown	*	179	95%	39%	37%	15%	10%
Johnston	54	931	93%	25%	36%	20%	18%
Lincoln	38	945	93%	27%	32%	20%	21%
Little Compton	11	73	94%	29%	37%	20%	14%
Middletown	57	606	93%	27%	31%	20%	22%
Narragansett	11	235	95%	34%	34%	22%	10%
New Shoreham	*	46	91%	2%	21%	40%	36%
Newport	55	562	90%	16%	24%	22%	38%
North Kingstown	38	1,017	94%	33%	34%	17%	16%
North Providence	64	969	91%	20%	27%	22%	31%
North Smithfield	13	415	94%	29%	36%	21%	15%
Pawtucket	273	2,411	90%	22%	25%	21%	33%
Portsmouth	38	578	96%	47%	37%	12%	4%
Providence	720	6,047	87%	14%	21%	18%	48%
Scituate	*	359	94%	31%	33%	22%	15%
Smithfield	19	671	94%	26%	41%	19%	14%
South Kingstown	39	705	93%	24%	35%	24%	18%
Tiverton	19	489	93%	26%	30%	25%	19%
Warwick	202	2,356	90%	12%	24%	25%	39%
West Warwick	85	1,087	87%	9%	17%	23%	51%
Westerly	43	633	93%	22%	33%	23%	23%
Woonsocket	195	1,770	88%	17%	23%	18%	41%
<i>Charter Schools</i>	<i>148</i>	<i>3,710</i>	<i>90%</i>	<i>12%</i>	<i>23%</i>	<i>22%</i>	<i>43%</i>
<i>RI School for the Deaf</i>	<i>*</i>	<i>20</i>	<i>87%</i>	<i>10%</i>	<i>10%</i>	<i>19%</i>	<i>62%</i>
<i>Four Core Cities</i>	<i>1,279</i>	<i>10,964</i>	<i>88%</i>	<i>16%</i>	<i>22%</i>	<i>19%</i>	<i>43%</i>
<i>Remainder of State</i>	<i>1,366</i>	<i>24,462</i>	<i>93%</i>	<i>26%</i>	<i>32%</i>	<i>20%</i>	<i>22%</i>
<i>Rhode Island</i>	<i>2,794</i>	<i>39,156</i>	<i>91%</i>	<i>22%</i>	<i>28%</i>	<i>20%</i>	<i>30%</i>

Source of Data for Table/Methodology

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

Attendance rates are calculated by dividing the state-calculated "average daily attendance" by the "average daily membership."

Chronic absence rates are based on attendance patterns for students who were enrolled in a district for at least 90 days. A total of 2,794 Rhode Island students in grades K-3 were not included in this analysis because they were only enrolled for a short period. The Rhode Island Department of Education excludes these students so that chronic absence issues can be examined separate from student mobility issues. It is likely that more students were excluded from districts with higher student mobility rates.

Core cities are Central Falls, Pawtucket, Providence, and Woonsocket.

Charter schools include Achievement First Rhode Island, Blackstone Valley Prep Mayoral Academy, The Compass School, Paul Cuffee Charter School, Highlander Charter School, Hope Academy, International Charter School, Kingston Hill Academy, The Learning Community, RISE Prep Mayoral Academy, and SouthSide Elementary Charter School.

*Fewer than 10 students are in this category. Actual numbers are not shown to protect student confidentiality. These students are still counted in district totals and in the four core cities, remainder of the state, and state totals.

References

¹ Romero, M., & Lee, Y. (2008). *The influence of maternal and family risk on chronic absenteeism in early schooling*. New York, NY: Columbia University, Mailman School of Public Health, National Center for Children in Poverty.

^{2,31} Chang, H. N., & Romero, M. (2008). *Present, engaged, and accounted for: The critical importance of addressing chronic absence in the early grades*. New York, NY: Columbia University, Mailman School of Public Health, National Center for Children in Poverty.

(continued on page 190)