

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 60 days and missed 12 days or more of school, including excused and unexcused absences (10% of 120 days before schools moved to distance learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic).

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

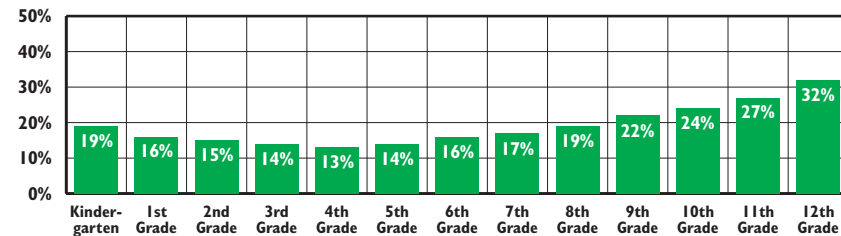
chronically absent than higher-income children. In the U.S., one in five (21%) poor kindergartners was chronically absent, compared to less than one in 10 (8%) of their higher-income peers.⁵ The rate of chronic absence is twice as high for students experiencing homelessness as it is for the general student 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, diabetes, obesity, 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, 2019-2020 School Year*



Source: Rhode Island Department of Education, 2019-2020 school year. *Only includes data through March 15, 2020, when all schools moved to distance learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Not directly comparable to previous *Factbooks*.

◆ **Chronic absence rates are high in kindergarten and then decline before increasing again in middle and high school. During the 2019-2020 school year, 19% of Rhode Island kindergarten students, 16% of first graders, 15% of second graders, and 14% of third graders were chronically absent (i.e., absent 12 days or more). Sixteen 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 2019-2020 school year, the average daily attendance rate for K-3 students in Rhode Island's four core cities was 93%, but 25% of students were chronically absent.¹⁵**

◆ **The students with the highest levels of chronic absence were also in the populations hardest hit by the pandemic.¹⁶ Data from the first 80 days of the 2020-2021 school year in Rhode Island show a large increase in absences due to some students missing school more frequently, with students attending a high poverty school much more likely to be chronically absent.¹⁷**

◆ **Schools, districts, and the state 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, and creating attendance teams that regularly review data on student absenteeism and intervene with students with troubling absenteeism patterns.^{18,19}**

Table 51. Chronic Early Absence Rates, Grades K-3, Rhode Island, 2019-2020 School Year**

SCHOOL DISTRICT	K-3 STUDENTS ENROLLED LESS THAN 60 DAYS	K-3 STUDENTS ENROLLED 60 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+ DAYS
Barrington	17	891	95%	57%	34%	10%
Bristol Warren	38	910	95%	61%	28%	11%
Burrillville	20	607	94%	47%	38%	15%
Central Falls	96	874	94%	50%	32%	18%
Chariho	33	832	95%	60%	32%	8%
Coventry	77	1,230	95%	56%	31%	13%
Cranston	162	2,941	95%	53%	33%	14%
Cumberland	79	1,370	96%	60%	32%	8%
East Greenwich	19	684	96%	67%	25%	7%
East Providence	66	1,487	95%	58%	32%	11%
Exeter-West Greenwich	14	467	96%	61%	33%	7%
Foster	*	140	95%	59%	31%	11%
Glocester	10	361	96%	69%	23%	8%
Jamestown	10	191	96%	62%	31%	7%
Johnston	74	954	94%	48%	35%	17%
Lincoln	48	901	95%	60%	29%	11%
Little Compton	*	82	95%	63%	30%	6%
Middletown	62	643	95%	54%	32%	14%
Narragansett	12	276	95%	52%	37%	11%
New Shoreham	0	42	93%	33%	52%	14%
Newport	34	656	93%	41%	37%	23%
North Kingstown	49	985	95%	60%	30%	10%
North Providence	64	980	95%	60%	28%	13%
North Smithfield	*	437	96%	63%	30%	8%
Pawtucket	274	2,669	94%	51%	31%	17%
Portsmouth	29	606	95%	57%	33%	10%
Providence	748	6,923	92%	39%	34%	27%
Scituate	12	348	95%	55%	35%	9%
Smithfield	16	655	96%	66%	28%	6%
South Kingstown	34	789	95%	56%	32%	12%
Tiverton	23	542	95%	49%	36%	15%
Warwick	96	2,571	95%	54%	32%	14%
West Warwick	67	1,123	94%	46%	36%	18%
Westerly	30	720	95%	54%	37%	9%
Woonsocket	213	1,880	91%	35%	31%	35%
<i>Charter Schools</i>	<i>108</i>	<i>3,242</i>	<i>96%</i>	<i>62%</i>	<i>29%</i>	<i>9%</i>
<i>RI School for the Deaf</i>	<i>0</i>	<i>19</i>	<i>90%</i>	<i>26%</i>	<i>37%</i>	<i>37%</i>
<i>Four Core Cities</i>	<i>1,331</i>	<i>12,346</i>	<i>93%</i>	<i>42%</i>	<i>33%</i>	<i>25%</i>
<i>Remainder of State</i>	<i>1,205</i>	<i>25,421</i>	<i>95%</i>	<i>56%</i>	<i>32%</i>	<i>12%</i>
<i>Rhode Island</i>	<i>2,644</i>	<i>41,028</i>	<i>94%</i>	<i>52%</i>	<i>32%</i>	<i>16%</i>

Source of Data for Table/Methodology

Rhode Island Department of Education, 2019-2020 school year.

**Partial data due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Data are only included through March 15, 2020 when all schools transitioned to distance learning. Chronic absence is measured as missing 12 days or more of school, which is 10% or more of the average number (120) of total school days through March 15, 2020 (the number of total school days varied by district). Data are not directly comparable to previous *Factbooks*.

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 60 days. A total of 2,644 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.

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