

# 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.<sup>1,2</sup> 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.<sup>3</sup>

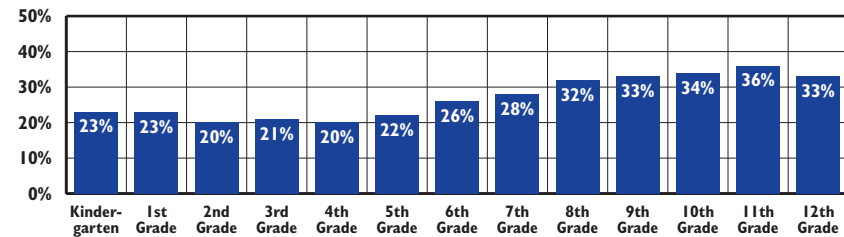
Nationally in the 2017-2018 school year, 12% of all elementary school students were chronically absent.<sup>4</sup> In the early grades, children from families living in poverty are much more likely to be chronically absent than higher-

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.<sup>5</sup> The rate of chronic absence is twice as high for students experiencing homelessness as it is for the general student population.<sup>6</sup> 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.<sup>7</sup>

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.<sup>8,9</sup>

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.<sup>10,11,12</sup>

**Chronic Absence Rates in Rhode Island by Grade, 2020-2021 School Year\***



Source: Rhode Island Department of Education, 2020-2021 school year. \*The definition of absence may differ from prior years due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Not directly comparable to previous *Factbooks*.

◆ **Chronic absence rates are high in kindergarten and first grade and then decline before increasing again in middle and high school. During the 2020-2021 school year, 23% of Rhode Island kindergarten students and first graders, 20% of second graders, and 21% of third graders were chronically absent (i.e., absent 18 days or more). Twenty-two percent of all Rhode Island children in grades K-3 were chronically absent.**<sup>13</sup>

◆ **Averages for school-wide attendance can mask significant numbers of chronically absent individual students.**<sup>14</sup> During the 2020-2021 school year, the average daily attendance rate for K-3 students in Rhode Island's four core cities was 87%, but 42% of students were chronically absent.<sup>15</sup>

## 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.**<sup>16,17,18</sup>

◆ **States can also incorporate chronic absence measures into early warning and accountability systems and school improvement efforts, and can allocate resources to address barriers to attendance.**<sup>19,20</sup>

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Table 51. Chronic Early Absence Rates, Grades K-3, Rhode Island, 2020-2021 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	18	902	99%	87%	11%	1%	1%
Bristol Warren	36	870	93%	30%	30%	20%	21%
Burrillville	25	558	95%	49%	28%	9%	14%
Central Falls	74	800	90%	27%	23%	16%	35%
Chariho	47	768	96%	60%	24%	7%	8%
Coventry	81	1,148	95%	50%	26%	11%	13%
Cranston	184	2,854	95%	59%	22%	8%	11%
Cumberland	80	1,293	97%	70%	19%	6%	6%
East Greenwich	49	644	97%	74%	17%	5%	4%
East Providence	80	1,345	95%	57%	21%	9%	12%
Exeter-West Greenwich	*	433	97%	70%	22%	4%	3%
Foster	19	130	96%	52%	29%	10%	8%
Glocester	10	365	97%	67%	24%	5%	3%
Jamestown	*	193	97%	60%	33%	4%	3%
Johnston	88	925	97%	65%	24%	6%	5%
Lincoln	54	918	95%	54%	23%	9%	13%
Little Compton	*	84	97%	62%	27%	6%	5%
Middletown	67	597	95%	47%	27%	13%	13%
Narragansett	17	250	96%	54%	25%	14%	7%
New Shoreham	*	47	94%	32%	36%	17%	15%
Newport	50	566	87%	23%	19%	11%	47%
North Kingstown	34	966	94%	41%	28%	15%	16%
North Providence	64	973	95%	49%	24%	11%	15%
North Smithfield	20	416	97%	70%	19%	4%	7%
Pawtucket	251	2,476	91%	36%	22%	14%	28%
Portsmouth	25	606	97%	66%	23%	8%	4%
Providence	2,312	6,231	85%	20%	17%	16%	47%
Scituate	16	332	95%	46%	28%	14%	11%
Smithfield	16	662	97%	64%	24%	7%	5%
South Kingstown	49	708	96%	64%	20%	8%	9%
Tiverton	39	489	96%	56%	24%	12%	8%
Warwick	143	2,356	94%	55%	19%	9%	18%
West Warwick	108	1,045	89%	35%	21%	12%	33%
Westerly	43	641	95%	55%	25%	10%	11%
Woonsocket	239	1,755	86%	26%	18%	12%	44%
Charter Schools	98	3,480	94%	45%	23%	13%	19%
RI School for the Deaf	*	18	89%	17%	17%	22%	44%
Four Core Cities	2,876	11,262	87%	25%	19%	15%	42%
Remainder of State	1,479	24,084	95%	56%	22%	9%	12%
Rhode Island	4,454	38,844	93%	46%	21%	11%	22%

## Source of Data for Table/Methodology

Rhode Island Department of Education, 2020-2021 school year.

\*\*The definition of absence may differ between districts and from prior years due to the transition to hybrid and distance learning during the COVID-19 pandemic. Use caution when comparing these data across districts. 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 90 days. A total of 4,454 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, Segue Institute for Learning, 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

<sup>1</sup> 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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