

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.^{1,2} Children who are chronically absent in kindergarten show lower levels of achievement in math, reading, and general knowledge in first grade. Chronic absence in kindergarten appears to be especially detrimental for poor and Hispanic children.³ In Rhode Island, children who are chronically absent in kindergarten have lower levels of achievement as far out as the seventh grade and are more than twice as likely to be retained.⁴

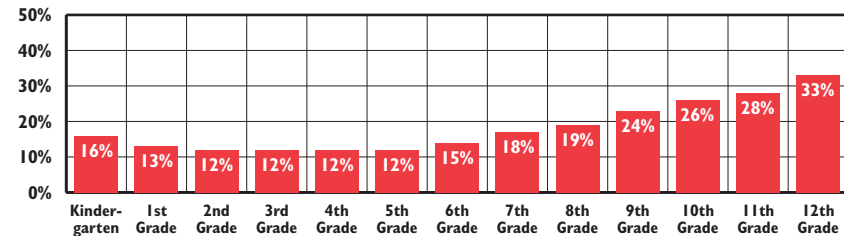
More than 3.1 million elementary school students nationwide or 14% of all elementary school students are chronically absent.⁵ In the early grades, children from poor families are much more likely to be chronically absent than higher-income children. In the U.S., one in five (21%) poor kindergartners were

chronically absent, compared to less than one in 10 (8%) of their higher-income peers.⁶ The rate of chronic absence is twice as high for students experiencing homelessness as it is for the general student population.⁷ 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.⁸

Young children are chronically absent from school for a variety of reasons. Asthma is one of the leading causes of school absenteeism, accounting for one-third of all absences, but other physical and behavioral health issues, including poor dental health, vision problems, diabetes, obesity, anxiety, and/or depression can also result in chronic absence.^{9,10}

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.^{11,12,13}

Chronic Absence Rates in Rhode Island by Grade, 2017-2018 School Year



Source: Rhode Island Department of Education, 2017-2018 school year.

- ◆ **Chronic absence rates are high in kindergarten and then decline before increasing again in middle and high school.** During the 2017-2018 school year, 16% of Rhode Island kindergarten students, 13% of first graders, 12% of second graders, and 12% of third graders were chronically absent (i.e., absent 18 days or more), showing little change from the 2016-2017 school year when 16% of kindergarten students, 14% of first graders, 12% of second graders, and 12% of third graders were chronically absent.^{14,15}
- ◆ **During the 2017-2018 school year, 13% of all Rhode Island children in grades K-3 were chronically absent, and an additional 16% missed 12 to 17 days of school.**¹⁶
- ◆ **Averages for school-wide attendance can mask significant numbers of chronically absent individual students.**¹⁷ During the 2017-2018 school year, the average daily attendance rate for K-3 students in Rhode Island's four core cities was 92%, but 24% of students were chronically absent.¹⁸
- ◆ **Schools, districts, and the state can nurture a culture of attendance by raising awareness among school and community personnel about the problem of chronic absence, using positive messaging to encourage parents to send their children to school on time and every day in the early grades, and creating attendance teams that regularly review data on student absenteeism and identify and intervene with students with troubling absenteeism patterns.**^{19,20}
- ◆ **Thirty-seven states are prioritizing reducing chronic absence by making chronic absence rates a key part of their accountability systems.**²¹ Rhode Island is including both student and teacher chronic absence rates in its accountability system.²²

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Table 51.

Chronic Early Absence Rates, Grades K-3, Rhode Island, 2017-2018 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	30	886	96%	51%	36%	10%	3%
Bristol Warren	93	954	95%	43%	32%	16%	10%
Burrillville	28	566	95%	40%	38%	14%	8%
Central Falls	154	851	92%	25%	28%	22%	24%
Chariho	32	801	96%	51%	37%	8%	4%
Coventry	69	1,299	95%	41%	35%	15%	9%
Cranston	176	2,904	95%	43%	32%	15%	10%
Cumberland	82	1,353	96%	48%	37%	11%	4%
East Greenwich	10	671	96%	48%	36%	12%	4%
East Providence	99	1,615	95%	39%	33%	16%	12%
Exeter-West Greenwich	20	478	96%	48%	37%	11%	4%
Foster	*	147	97%	63%	24%	9%	5%
Glocester	*	340	96%	54%	31%	11%	5%
Jamestown	*	191	95%	35%	47%	14%	5%
Johnston	52	957	94%	33%	34%	18%	15%
Lincoln	43	896	96%	45%	35%	12%	8%
Little Compton	*	99	96%	53%	31%	10%	6%
Middletown	60	690	95%	39%	38%	13%	9%
Narragansett	14	299	96%	43%	38%	15%	3%
New Shoreham	*	34	94%	18%	53%	12%	18%
Newport	75	712	94%	31%	33%	20%	16%
North Kingstown	57	933	96%	45%	36%	12%	7%
North Providence	73	1,007	95%	41%	33%	16%	10%
North Smithfield	13	487	96%	44%	35%	15%	6%
Pawtucket	312	2,827	94%	33%	32%	17%	17%
Portsmouth	40	607	96%	48%	35%	13%	5%
Providence	1,113	6,994	92%	24%	29%	21%	27%
Scituate	13	342	95%	39%	36%	18%	7%
Smithfield	23	658	96%	53%	34%	9%	4%
South Kingstown	55	845	96%	42%	41%	10%	6%
Tiverton	31	556	95%	38%	37%	17%	9%
Warwick	142	2,605	95%	39%	36%	15%	11%
West Warwick	105	1,142	94%	33%	34%	18%	15%
Westerly	54	755	95%	38%	37%	17%	7%
Woonsocket	345	1,934	92%	25%	31%	19%	24%
Charter Schools	90	3,062	96%	46%	31%	14%	9%
RI School for the Deaf	0	18	91%	28%	17%	22%	33%
Four Core Cities	1,924	12,606	92%	26%	30%	20%	24%
Remainder of State	1,517	25,829	95%	42%	35%	14%	9%
Rhode Island	3,531	41,515	94%	38%	33%	16%	13%

Source of Data for Table/Methodology

Rhode Island Department of Education, 2017-2018 school year.

Attendance rates are calculated by dividing the state-calculated "average days of attendance" by the "average days of 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 3,531 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.

^{2,3,12,19} 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.

⁴ RI DataHUB. (n.d.). *Chronic absenteeism among kindergarten students*. Retrieved March 7, 2019, from <http://ridatahub.org>

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