

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

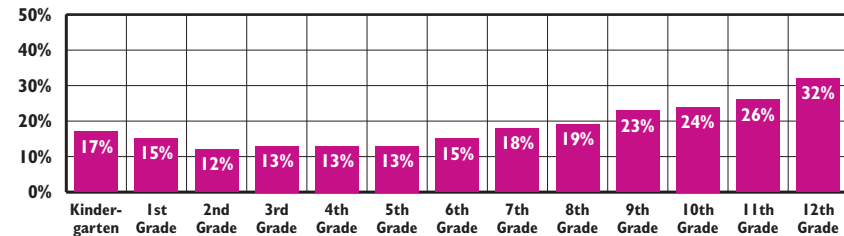
More than 3.1 million elementary school students nationwide or 14% of all elementary school students are chronically absent.⁵ In the early grades, children from poor families are much more likely to be chronically absent than higher-income children. In the U.S., one in five (21%) poor

kindergartners was 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}

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Chronic Absence Rates in Rhode Island by Grade, 2018-2019 School Year



Source: Rhode Island Department of Education, 2018-2019 school year.

- ◆ **Chronic absence rates are high in kindergarten and then decline before increasing again in middle and high school. During the 2018-2019 school year, 17% of Rhode Island kindergarten students, 15% of first graders, 12% of second graders, and 13% of third graders were chronically absent (i.e., absent 18 days or more), slightly higher than the 2017-2018 school year when 16% of kindergarten students, 13% of first graders, 12% of second graders, and 12% of third graders were chronically absent.**^{14,15}
- ◆ **During the 2018-2019 school year, 14% of all Rhode Island children in grades K-3 were chronically absent, and an additional 17% 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 2018-2019 school year, the average daily attendance rate for K-3 students in Rhode Island's four core cities was 92%, but 26% 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 prioritize reducing chronic absence by making chronic absence rates a key part of their accountability systems.**²¹ Rhode Island includes 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, 2018-2019 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	24	883	96%	45%	38%	13%	5%
Bristol Warren	57	958	95%	39%	35%	17%	9%
Burrillville	23	593	95%	33%	36%	19%	13%
Central Falls	154	829	94%	31%	29%	19%	21%
Chariho	26	808	96%	42%	39%	14%	5%
Coventry	60	1,281	95%	38%	37%	16%	10%
Cranston	161	2,952	95%	38%	36%	16%	10%
Cumberland	88	1,340	96%	45%	37%	13%	5%
East Greenwich	19	681	95%	36%	43%	15%	7%
East Providence	73	1,538	95%	38%	35%	18%	9%
Exeter-West Greenwich	38	474	95%	33%	47%	13%	7%
Foster	*	147	96%	53%	28%	12%	7%
Glocester	12	333	97%	56%	32%	8%	4%
Jamestown	*	204	95%	32%	42%	18%	8%
Johnston	69	937	94%	31%	34%	22%	13%
Lincoln	42	882	95%	44%	35%	12%	10%
Little Compton	0	83	96%	45%	35%	14%	6%
Middletown	62	666	95%	33%	37%	19%	11%
Narragansett	12	286	95%	37%	35%	20%	8%
New Shoreham	*	41	95%	20%	51%	22%	7%
Newport	86	666	93%	26%	32%	19%	22%
North Kingstown	50	989	95%	38%	41%	12%	9%
North Providence	78	960	94%	35%	32%	19%	14%
North Smithfield	10	445	96%	44%	38%	13%	6%
Pawtucket	275	2,765	94%	36%	31%	17%	16%
Portsmouth	28	614	96%	44%	40%	12%	4%
Providence	1,030	6,991	92%	23%	27%	20%	29%
Scituate	*	340	95%	41%	36%	16%	6%
Smithfield	31	674	96%	42%	41%	14%	3%
South Kingstown	44	804	95%	37%	41%	14%	7%
Tiverton	28	548	96%	42%	38%	14%	7%
Warwick	147	2,592	95%	33%	38%	19%	10%
West Warwick	111	1,135	94%	30%	35%	18%	17%
Westerly	43	721	96%	37%	40%	17%	7%
Woonsocket	322	1,910	91%	23%	28%	20%	29%
Charter Schools	95	3,192	96%	44%	33%	14%	9%
RI School for the Deaf	0	14	93%	21%	29%	14%	36%
Four Core Cities	1,781	12,495	92%	26%	28%	19%	26%
Remainder of State	1,448	25,575	95%	38%	37%	16%	9%
Rhode Island	3,324	41,276	94%	35%	34%	17%	14%

Source of Data for Table/Methodology

Rhode Island Department of Education, 2018-2019 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 3,324 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 February 10, 2020, from <http://ridatahub.org>

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