

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. In a 2021 study, a correlation was found between early childhood chronic absenteeism and longer-term impacts on executive functioning skills.^{1,2,3} 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.⁴ 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.⁵

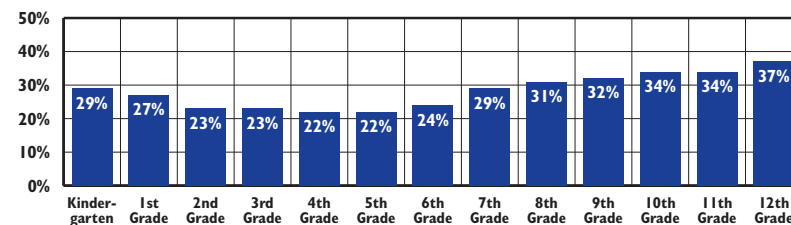
Nationally, rates of chronic absenteeism increased during the 2021-

2022 school year with elementary and middle schools showing the largest increases.⁶ In the early grades, children from families living in poverty are much more likely to be chronically absent than higher-income children.⁷ Children experiencing homelessness are twice as likely to be chronically absent.⁸ 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.⁹

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.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}

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Chronic Absence Rates in Rhode Island by Grade, 2022-2023 School Year



Source: Rhode Island Department of Education, 2022-2023 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 2022-2023 school year, 29% of Rhode Island kindergarten students, 27% of first graders, 23% of second graders, and 23% of third graders were chronically absent (i.e., absent 18 days or more). Twenty-five 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 2022-2023 school year, the average daily attendance rate for K-3 students in Rhode Island's four core cities was 90%, but 39% of students were chronically absent.¹⁵**

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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.¹⁶ Home visiting programs, where caring adults such as teachers and community members work to build trusting relationships with students and parents, have been effective in decreasing rates of absenteeism.¹⁷ Connecticut allocated \$10.7 million in federal COVID-relief funding to launch the Learner Engagement and Attendance Program in districts with the highest chronic absenteeism, and this investment has shown promising results.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**

Table 51.

Chronic Early Absence Rates, Grades K-3, Rhode Island, 2022-2023 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	927	95%	30%	39%	23%	9%
Bristol Warren	27	816	93%	19%	35%	24%	22%
Burrillville	17	550	92%	14%	32%	30%	24%
Central Falls	99	697	92%	25%	30%	22%	23%
Charlho	38	820	94%	28%	39%	22%	11%
Coventry	58	1,200	93%	20%	39%	23%	18%
Cranston	174	2,780	93%	23%	34%	23%	20%
Cumberland	79	1,418	94%	27%	37%	20%	15%
East Greenwich	16	746	94%	26%	42%	21%	12%
East Providence	100	1,430	93%	23%	32%	25%	19%
Exeter-West Greenwich	14	403	94%	27%	37%	23%	13%
Foster	*	133	92%	20%	36%	17%	27%
Glocester	*	379	96%	51%	36%	8%	4%
Jamestown	*	146	94%	23%	42%	25%	10%
Johnston	40	938	93%	23%	33%	25%	19%
Lincoln	35	971	93%	22%	34%	24%	21%
Little Compton	*	85	94%	24%	33%	25%	19%
Middletown	53	595	93%	25%	34%	20%	20%
Narragansett	12	215	94%	21%	38%	28%	13%
New Shoreham	*	47	91%	4%	23%	28%	45%
Newport	35	550	91%	17%	26%	22%	35%
North Kingstown	33	1,013	94%	24%	40%	22%	14%
North Providence	78	1,005	92%	20%	33%	22%	25%
North Smithfield	11	433	94%	19%	39%	26%	16%
Pawtucket	254	2,390	91%	20%	27%	21%	32%
Portsmouth	40	560	94%	23%	42%	22%	14%
Providence	711	5,761	89%	14%	22%	21%	43%
Scituate	*	360	94%	21%	40%	24%	15%
Smithfield	18	717	94%	29%	38%	21%	12%
South Kingstown	28	672	94%	24%	41%	22%	14%
Tiverton	21	491	94%	24%	40%	24%	12%
Warwick	109	2,335	92%	19%	34%	21%	26%
West Warwick	92	1,047	91%	16%	30%	24%	31%
Westerly	21	636	94%	18%	39%	27%	17%
Woonsocket	238	1,802	89%	14%	24%	22%	41%
Charter Schools	160	3,874	92%	20%	28%	23%	29%
RI School for the Deaf	*	20	89%	10%	5%	30%	55%
Four Core Cities	1,302	10,650	90%	16%	24%	21%	39%
Remainder of State	1,218	28,519	93%	23%	36%	23%	19%
Rhode Island	2,681	39,189	92%	21%	32%	22%	25%

Source of Data for Table/Methodology

Rhode Island Department of Education, 2022-2023 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 2,681 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.

^{2,3,11} 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.

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