

What is Chronic Absence?

Chronic absence is a measure of how much school a student misses for any reason. It is a broader measure than truancy, which only tracks unexcused absences. Starting in the early grades, chronic absence levels can reach remarkably high levels. National data suggests one in 10 kindergartners misses a month of school every year. In some districts, it runs as high as one in 4. The rates only get higher by middle and high school when truancy grows worse.

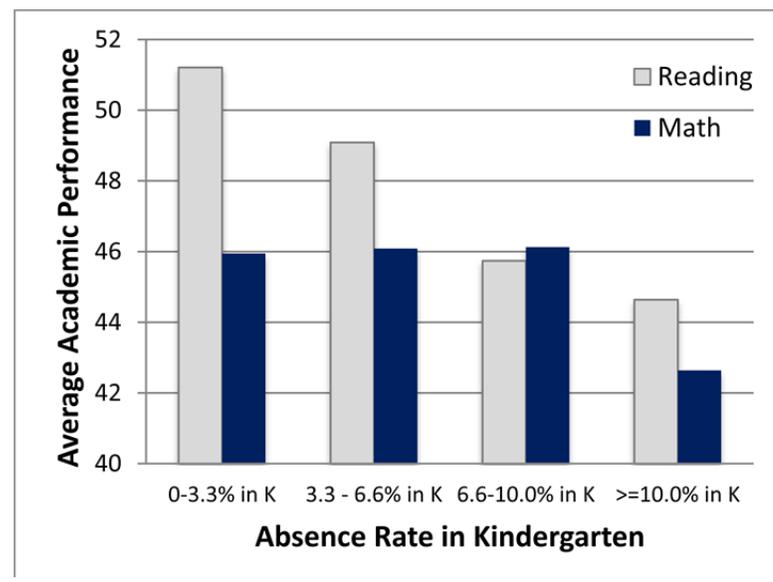
Why Does It Matter?

Research backs up the common sense notion that children will do worse in school if they aren't in class to learn. An analysis of national sample of chronically absent kindergarten students (those missing 10 percent of school days) revealed lower academic performance when they reach 1st grade. Reading scores for Latino children were most affected. Among poor children, who lack the resources to make up lost time, chronic absence in kindergarten translated into lower 5th grade achievement.

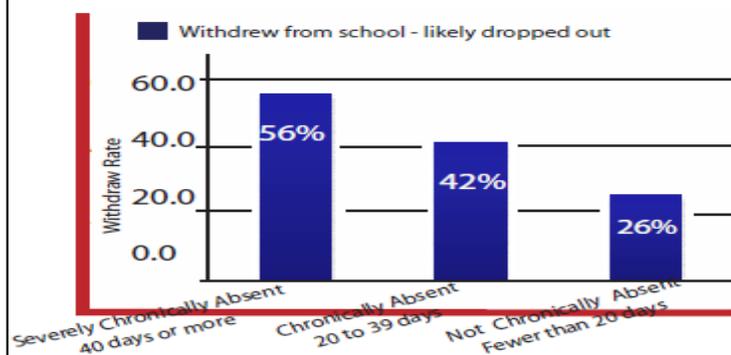
By 6th grade, chronic absence begins to predict high school dropout rates, a study of Baltimore students showed. By ninth grade, missing 20 percent of school can better predict of dropout than eighth-grade test scores, Chicago researchers found. Along with behavior problems and failure of core academic courses, poor student attendance is a critical early warning signs of dropout.

Low-income children are disproportionately affected by chronic absence in the early grades. They are more likely to miss too much school and more likely to fall behind in academics, particularly reading, which is the focus of instruction in the primary grades.

Chronic Absence in Kindergarten Affects 5th Grade Achievement for Poor Children



Sixth Grade Chronic Absence Predicts Likelihood of Dropping Out



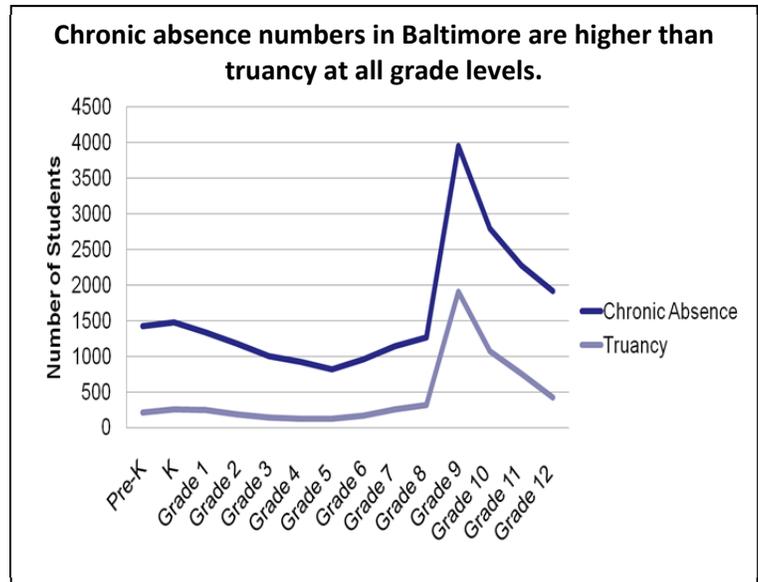
Nearly half of all chronically absent 6th graders in Baltimore during the 2002-2003 school year withdrew from school prior to graduation.

When chronic absence is too high, it can affect all students, as teachers spend more time reviewing concept. In states where funding is tied to attendance, chronic absence can cost schools money.

Why Is Chronic Absence Often Overlooked?

Most schools pay far more attention to average daily attendance (the percentage of students who show up each day to school) and unexcused absences (truancy.) Both figures can mask the problem with chronic absence. For example, a school of 200 students with 95 percent average daily attendance could still have 60 students missing a month of school over the course of the year. Average figures do not reveal whether absences are spread evenly or whether they are concentrated, with a few students experiencing excessive absences. At the same time, truancy figures underestimate the number of days student are actually

missing. Most young children typically don't miss school without an adult calling in an excuse. Overly punitive discipline codes that result in suspension for minor offenses, or even for truancy, can exacerbate the chronic absence problem. (Suspensions are considered excused absences.)



What are schools doing about it?

Chronic absence can be significantly reduced when schools and communities work together. The most effective efforts:

- **Use data on chronic absence to identify patterns.** The Oakland school district recently completed an analysis that maps attendance patterns by neighborhood, by ethnicity and by grade. The district has set goals for improvement and is monitoring the data regularly.
- **Take comprehensive approaches involving students, families, and community agencies.** Baltimore launched a citywide attendance initiative that makes chronic absence a focus and addresses transportation, safety and health concerns.
- **Examine factors contributing to chronic absence.** A Providence school interviewed parents and found that those who worked overnight shifts were coming home and falling asleep before bringing their children to school. The school opened an earlier day care program to help those parents and saw attendance improve.
- **Pay attention to attendance early,** ideally starting in pre-K, with special attention to transition years: kindergarten, 6th and 9th grades. Chicago Public Schools have started tracking attendance in their preschool programs.
- **Offer positive supports** to promote school attendance before resorting to punitive responses or legal action. A New York State study found court action does little to reduce truancy.

For more information go visit Attendance Works at www.attendanceworks.org