

Chronic Absenteeism in the Early Grades: A Snapshot of New Jersey

Chronic absenteeism—defined as missing 10 percent or more of school days in most states—is a problem across the nation. In New Jersey, this means missing 18 days or more each school year, or about 2 days per month. Chronic absenteeism is particularly high for pre-kindergarten and kindergarten children compared with students in other elementary and middle school grades. A recent [report](#) revealed that 11.4 percent of kindergarten students in New Jersey were chronically absent in the 2015–2016 school year.¹ Missing a substantial amount of school in pre-kindergarten and kindergarten sets students up for a number of challenges. Students who are chronically absent in the early years often lack critical school readiness skills, are more likely to miss important academic milestones, and may lag behind their peers with social-emotional development.

New Jersey is tackling the problem

The New Jersey Department of Education (NJDOE) developed [guidance for district and school leaders](#) that defines chronic absenteeism. It suggests strategies to reduce K-12 absenteeism, and identifies information schools can use to support student attendance initiatives.² However, the issues leading to absenteeism and strategies to reduce it may be different for children in pre-kindergarten and kindergarten than for older students. And the need for support from NJDOE to address the issue of chronic absenteeism in these early years has grown, as more districts in New Jersey now offer pre-kindergarten programs.

Like many other states, New Jersey chose to include chronic absenteeism as a measure of school accountability in the [state's Every Student Succeeds Act \(ESSA\) plan](#). Public schools in New Jersey with high chronic absenteeism rates are required to develop a corrective action plan of strategies specific to their student population and community to decrease chronic absenteeism rates. Although New Jersey's ESSA plan does not include pre-kindergarten in the calculation of chronic absenteeism rates for the purposes of school accountability, the state's plan recognizes that monitoring and improving attendance is critical to ensuring that children receive the benefits of quality preschool education. As a result, New Jersey schools are required to include data on pre-kindergarten students when reporting chronic absenteeism rates on school report cards.

New Jersey's vision to reduce chronic absenteeism in the early grades

- **Expand preschool** to provide all children with the opportunity to regularly attend programs close to home.
- **Focus state and local attention on the value of school attendance** at the critical developmental stage when young students build cognitive, social, emotional, and language skills needed for school readiness.
- **Improve students' chances of school readiness** by enhancing family engagement in learning and development.
- **Provide tools and resources** that assist schools' and districts' efforts to help young children in their communities come to school ready to learn.

Research shows that missing school in the early years matters

Routines start early for students and their families.

Getting in the habit of regularly going to school in preschool and kindergarten can help with later attendance.³ A 2018 study found that students who were chronically absent in pre-kindergarten were five to six times more likely to be chronically absent at age 7, when they were typically in 2nd grade.⁴

Research also suggests that chronic absenteeism in pre-kindergarten and kindergarten is associated with poorer school outcomes as children transition through school, including:

- **Lack of kindergarten readiness skills.** Research shows that students who were chronically absent in pre-kindergarten had **lower kindergarten readiness scores in math, letter recognition, and social emotional skills** such as engaging with others, cooperation, following instructions, and self-regulation.⁴

- **Missing critical academic milestones.** Attendance in pre-kindergarten and kindergarten influences academic achievement as students progress through school. **Research shows that students who were chronically absent in pre-kindergarten scored lower on reading fluency in 2nd grade.**⁴ Early reading performance, in turn, is highly predictive of future school success. When students are behind in reading performance early on, they are four times more likely to drop out of high school.⁵
- **Future social emotional and behavior problems.** Missing school in pre-kindergarten and kindergarten has been linked to poor social emotional development in the early grades, including **reduced social engagement with peers.**⁶ Students may also be more likely to experience behavior problems later on. For example, one study found that **students who were chronically absent in kindergarten were twice as likely as high-attending peers to be suspended from school by 7th grade.**⁷
- **Grade repetition.** Chronic absenteeism in the early grades decreases students' likeliness to move on to the next grade. A 2012 study found that **one-quarter of the students who were chronically absent in pre-kindergarten and kindergarten were held back in later grades.**⁸

Next steps

Using data to identify the extent of the problem and who is most likely to be chronically absent is the first step in reducing chronic absenteeism in pre-kindergarten and kindergarten:

- School districts can work closely with pre-kindergarten providers (both state-funded and private) to systematically collect attendance data.
- Education leaders can examine attendance records to assess the level of chronic absenteeism in pre-kindergarten and kindergarten.

Next, stakeholders can work together to increase attendance among the youngest learners:

- Researchers, policymakers, and school leaders can work together during collaborative meetings to identify and promote evidence-based practices that schools and teachers can implement to combat chronic absenteeism.



This fact sheet is part of a three-part series that highlights the problem of chronic absenteeism in the early grades in New Jersey and across the nation. An additional fact sheet looks at reasons for and patterns of chronic absenteeism, including strategies educators can use to assess patterns in their schools and districts. Another fact sheet highlights research-based strategies to reduce chronic absenteeism in the early grades.

References

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- ⁴ Ehrlich, S. B., Gwynne, J. A., & Allensworth, E. M. (2018). *Pre-kindergarten attendance matters: Early chronic absence patterns and relationships to learning outcomes*. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 44, 136-151.
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- ⁸ Connolly, F., & Olson, L. (2012). *Early elementary performance and attendance in Baltimore City Schools' pre-kindergarten and kindergarten*. Baltimore, MD: Baltimore Education Research Consortium.

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