

Early-grade absenteeism



Keeping her young children in school was tough for Ikeda Jones, who stands at the top of the stairs at the homeless shelter in Chicago where the family lived for a time. Her daughter Kymarria (second from left) was in and out of preschool as the family bounced from home to home, moving five times in two years. Mobility and family transiency are on reason thousands of preschoolers miss almost a month of school in CPS. [File photo by Jason Reblando]

Trancy has always been recognized as a risk factor for dropping out of high school. In the battle to prevent it, some educators and experts are shifting their attention to chronic absenteeism in younger students. Chronic absenteeism is defined as missing at least 10 percent of school days.

Preschool and the primary grades lay the educational foundation for children, but missing too much school in these critical early grades can easily crack that foundation—especially among children in poverty.

Anecdotally, principals say that young children who miss too much school are likely to struggle academically in the later grades. Research has linked early attendance to lower test scores in 3rd grade, which are a predictor of future school success. One study found that high school dropouts could be identified with 66 percent accuracy in 3rd grade: In most cases, the dropouts were students who had had just six or more absences.

A *Catalyst Chicago* analysis of data from Chicago Public Schools shows that the problem of early absenteeism is widespread: Nearly 24,000 students in preschool through 3rd grade were chronically absent in 2009-2010—15 percent of all students at those grade levels. The rate may, in fact, be higher; in responding to *Catalyst's* Freedom of Information Act Request, CPS redacted data from a number of schools.

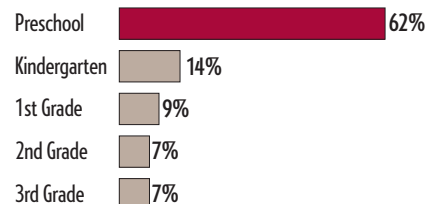
Young children miss school for a variety of reasons, just like older students, such as illness. Family difficulties may make it tougher for parents to get their child to school, setting up an early pattern of absenteeism. Some parents say that half-day preschool and kindergarten are less convenient and contribute to absences, especially if half-day programs send a message that preschool and kindergarten aren't "real school."

For more, see the full story, "Thousands of students miss weeks of school in early grades," at www.catalyst-chicago.org.

PRESCHOOLERS CHRONICALLY ABSENT

Some parents might not consider preschool to be important, which may contribute to the staggering absentee rate for preschool programs. The true number of absences could be much higher, since CPS omits data in certain instances involving small numbers of students in a particular grade.

CHRONIC ABSENTEE RATE IN...



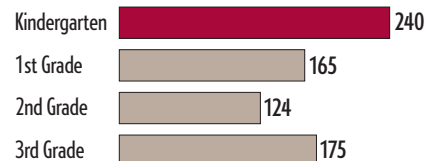
Note: Preschool data do not include community-based programs operated with CPS funding.

Source: Chicago Public Schools, 2009-10.

WORSE THAN AVERAGE

Nationally, about 11 percent of kindergarteners, 9 percent of 1st-grade students and 6 percent of 3rd-graders are chronically absent according to the National Center for Children in Poverty. As in many urban districts, the rates in Chicago are higher.

NUMBER OF SCHOOLS WHERE CHRONIC ABSENTEEISM IS WORSE THAN THE NATIONAL AVERAGE IN...



Note: The average 1st-grade absenteeism rate was used for 2nd grade because no 2nd-grade statistic was available.

Source: Chicago Public Schools, 2009-10.

LOSING A MONTH OF SCHOOL

Preschool programs have worse attendance than any other K-8 grade. At nearly one-third of the district's preschools, 80 percent of students or more are chronically absent.

OUT OF 404 PRESCHOOL PROGRAMS...

- 80%** At least 20% of students are chronically absent
- 71%** At least 40% of students are chronically absent
- 56%** At least 60% of students are chronically absent
- 30%** At least 80% of students are chronically absent

Note: Does not include community-based preschools.

Source: Chicago Public Schools, 2009-10.

Recommended reading

- “A National Portrait of Chronic Absenteeism in the Early Grades,” Mariajosé Romero and Young-Sun Lee, October 2007. This research brief offers statistics about how widespread chronic absenteeism is in the early years, as well as absenteeism’s disproportionate impact on low-income children. www.nccp.org
- “Curbing Chronic Early Absenteeism: Implications for Community School Collaboratives,” PowerPoint presentation, Coalition of Community Schools National Forum. This presentation offers examples of effective strategies for reducing absenteeism. www.communityschools.org
- “Present, Engaged & Accounted For: The Critical Importance of Addressing Chronic Absence in the Early Grades,” by Hedy Chang and Mariajose Romero, National Center for Children in Poverty, September 2008. This report gives a comprehensive picture of chronic absenteeism in grades K-3 and discusses strategies for tackling it. www.nccp.org
- “Attendance in Early Elementary Grades: Association with Student Characteristics, School Readiness and Third Grade Outcomes,” Applied Survey Research, May 2011. This study shows that chronic absences also have a serious impact on students who start kindergarten with strong test scores—suggesting that absenteeism can erode gains created by preschool programs. www.attendanceworks.org
- “Socioeconomic Disadvantage, School Attendance, and Early Cognitive Development: The Differential Effects of School Exposure,” by Douglas Ready, *Sociology of Education*, October 2010. This paper finds that chronic absenteeism can actually widen the achievement gaps that exist when children start school. www.attendancecounts.org
- “Strengthening Schools by Strengthening Families: Community Strategies to Reverse Chronic Absenteeism in the Early Grades and Improve Supports for Children and Families.” By Kim Nauer, Andrew White and Rajeev Yerneni, Center for New York City Affairs at the New School, October 2008. An analysis of chronic absenteeism in grades K-5 in New York City public schools. www.myfuturemydecision.com
- “Present and accounted for: Improving student attendance through family and community involvement,” J.L. Epstein and S.B. Sheldon, *Journal of Educational Research*, 2002. This study shows that family and community involvement activities can help increase elementary school attendance. <http://dothan.troy.edu>

Getting children to school

A two-year study from the University of Chicago Consortium on School Research, slated to wrap up in fall 2013, should provide more information about how to solve chronic early absenteeism. In addition to tracking student outcomes and absence patterns, researchers will survey parents and teachers about why students are absent and what barriers keep students from coming to school.

WORK WITH FAMILIES

Some solutions start with intensive monitoring of children’s absences, then intervention if the situation worsens. New York City, for instance, has used attendance data to identify students who are missing too much school, then paired students with mentors to help curb the problem.

Another program, called “Check & Connect,” brings the family into the mix (see sidebar).

Parent contracts or agreements can ensure that parents know the school’s attendance expectations.

Providing services, such as health clinics and child care at the school, are believed to help promote good attendance by solving family problems. A recent study found that absences decreased when a school nurse and social worker reached out with home visits to families of young students who had missed at least 20 percent of school days. While families cited illness as the reason for absences in 70 percent of cases, the nurses found that the actual rate of health-related absences was just 40 percent. Many children missed school because of family issues or transportation problems.

WHAT SCHOOLS CAN DO

Classroom practices can help teachers win the attendance battle. In some primary classrooms, teachers have

Check and connect

The “Check & Connect” program, first developed in Minnesota, is touted as a national model for reducing dropout rates. It began in high schools but has been successful with elementary students. Studies have found that it decreases truancy and dropout rates, and increases credit accumulation and school completion.

Students flagged for chronic absences are assigned a mentor who monitors their attendance, behavior and grades for at least two years, and continues working with them if they move to a different school. The mentors build relationships with students and their families, helping to solve problems that are getting in the way of good attendance.

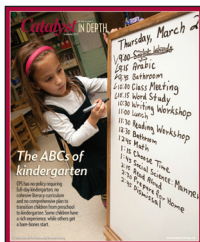
The program is based on the idea that strong connections between home and school are critical and that large numbers of absences are a sign that families need support.

For more information go to <http://checkandconnect.org/>

their students sing a song in honor of anyone who is missing, so that children know they, too, will be missed if they don’t show up. Greeting students by name every day can also promote good attendance.

Having an engaging classroom is important, says Hedy Chang, director of the national organization Attendance Works. If young students are motivated to come to school, they may be able to convince their parents to bring them even in the face of obstacles.

The National Center for Children in Poverty uses a pyramid-shaped chart to summarize helpful responses to attendance issues.



To reap the full benefits of preschool, children need to make a smooth transition to a rich kindergarten experience. Yet in Chicago Public Schools, that doesn’t always happen. For a comprehensive report on the kindergarten year in CPS, go to www.catalyst-chicago.org and see our Summer 2011 *Catalyst In Depth*.