

Massachusetts: Chronic Absenteeism Rate Rose in Disrupted School Year

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State House News Service

New statewide school attendance data show the percentage of students deemed chronically absent was up so far this pandemic-disrupted school year, as compared to the last three academic years, with rates soaring among English learners, economically disadvantaged students, and students with disabilities.

Seventeen percent of Massachusetts students have been categorized as chronically absent – meaning they missed 10 percent or more of their enrolled school days – through March of the 2020-2021 school year, according to Department of Elementary and Secondary Education numbers updated Friday.

With a statewide enrollment total of 911,465 students, that figure works out to more than 154,000 students absent for 10 percent or more of their school days.

Through March 2 of last year, 13 percent of students were chronically absent students, and the percentage hovered near that point in the 2018-2019 (12.9 percent) and 2017-2018 (13.2 percent) school years.

The average number of absences per student so far this year sits at six, close to the 5.7 recorded last year and below the 9.6 from 2018-2019, the last school year not disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Schooling in Massachusetts – as in other places across the country and the globe – has been transformed by COVID-19,

creating new challenges for students, families and educators.

School buildings throughout the state shuttered in March 2020, forcing an abrupt and experimental transition to remote learning amid a public health crisis that threw much of daily life into disarray.

When the new school year began in the fall, some districts remained fully remote while others brought back in-person learning part-time or full-time. More students have returned to classrooms throughout the year, and as of April 27, 146 districts were fully in-person for grades K-12.

Elementary and Secondary Education Commissioner Jeff Riley this spring set deadlines for districts that had not already done so to phase out remote learning. Except for cases where the state approved waivers, elementary and middle schoolers were due back in classrooms in April, and May 17 is the date for high schoolers.

“Absenteeism is one of the challenges that has prompted the Department to urge and require school districts to provide in-person learning,” Colleen Quinn, a spokesperson for the Executive Office of Education, said in a statement to the News Service. “While school committees set policies related to attendance, and parents and school districts have the primary responsibility for attendance of individual students, the Department recognizes chronic absenteeism as an important element of all school districts’ accountability measurements, and uses the data in combination with other indicators to make determinations as to which school districts need more assistance and involvement from DESE.”

Remote instruction means students don’t have to worry about inclement weather, missing a bus or having a parent available to take them to school. It also lacks the engagement with peers and teachers that comes along with in-person classes and can present new obstacles to participation, like a lack of

reliable internet or quiet workspace, or a need to oversee a younger sibling's schoolwork.

Families are able to choose to have their students continue remote learning for the rest of the school year, and state guidance requires that students who are learning remotely have a daily opportunity to interact with a teacher. The latest updates to that guidance require a visual component as part of the daily live check-in, using videoconferencing or other methods of seeing students.

"Schools and districts need to assess how to use video conferencing in a way that is respectful of individual student's needs," the guidance says. "For example, if a student is reluctant to be seen in their home by classmates, a teacher might meet with the student in a breakout room with a virtual background for a short period of time to conduct the live check-in. In situations where the district or school has concerns about a student's attendance or level of engagement, they should employ additional levels of support to re-engage the student."

Along with new efforts around keeping students engaged in learning, this school year has presented districts – and state and local budget-writers – with new questions around enrollment numbers. Largely driven by declines in pre-K and kindergarten, the state's 400 school districts experienced an enrollment decline of more than 30,000 students this year, and it's unclear exactly how many will return to their public school systems in the fall.

Statewide, the 2020-2021 attendance rate stands at 94 percent, down from last year's 94.7 percent and the 94.6 percent recorded in each of the previous two years. The number of students with more than nine days of unexcused absences this year is 3.9 percent, down from 6.8 percent in 2019-2020 and 16.7 percent in the 2018-2019 school year.

Attendance and absenteeism figures vary by district, and across student subgroups.

This year's chronic absenteeism percentage is higher among students who are economically disadvantaged (29.6 percent, from 21.5 percent last year), English learners (29.6 percent, from 19.5 percent last year) and students with disabilities (26.3 percent, from 19.9 percent last year) than the statewide 17 percent.

That figure also varies by race and ethnicity – 6.8 percent of Asian students, 12.7 percent of white students, 23.9 percent of African American and Black students and 28 percent of Hispanic/Latino students fall into the chronically absent category.

Among the largest school districts, the department's data show 26.7 percent of Boston's 48,112 students are chronically absent, along with 23.2 percent of Springfield's 24,239 students, 21.7 percent of Worcester's 23,986 and 21.1 percent of Lynn's 15,587.

The chronically absent percentage differs across the three districts under state receivership – 46.2 percent in Southbridge, 39.1 percent in Holyoke and 18.6 percent in Lawrence. Districts consisting of one school, like charter or regional schools, land all over the spectrum.

Phoenix Academy Public Charter High School in Lawrence – which aims to serve “resilient, disconnected students” and on its website classifies 33 percent of its students as “formerly truant/dropout” – has a chronically absent rate of 99.4 percent, according to the DESE data, and Learning First Charter Public School in Worcester has a rate of 2.4 percent.

At Nashoba Valley Regional Vocational Technical School in Westford, 1.2 percent of students are chronically absent, and at Ralph C. Mahar Regional School in Orange, 64.9 percent of students meet that description.

State education officials in 2018 added chronic absenteeism as one of the indicators in their updated school and district accountability system.

On March 10, 2020, when Gov. Charlie Baker first declared a state of emergency around COVID-19, officials also announced measures to give districts more flexibility in their response to the public health crisis. For the 2019-2020 school year, the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education disregarded attendance data beyond March 2, 2020 for accountability purposes, calculating chronic absenteeism based on numbers up until that date.