

RHODE ISLAND KIDS COUNT

ONE UNION STATION
PROVIDENCE, RHODE ISLAND 02903
401/351-9400 • 401/351-1758 (FAX)

**Testimony Re: House Bill 8190 Re: RELATING TO EDUCATION --
ATTENDANCE FOR SUCCESS ACT**

House Education Committee

May 9, 2024

Jessica Vega, Senior Policy Analyst

Mr. Chair and members of the Committee, thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today. Rhode Island KIDS COUNT would like to support House Bill 8190 and thank Representative McNamara for sponsoring and Representatives Ackerman, Donovan, Cotter, McGaw, J. Lombardi, Voas, and Stewart for co-sponsoring. This act would focus on student attendance in schools, with a special emphasis on chronically absent students, mandate requirements for attendance policies and provide for multiple plans, reporting requirements, and supports to address chronic absence.

Reducing chronic absence is important for improving high school graduation rates and increasing college and career readiness.

Students being present and engaged in learning matters. Young children are chronically absent from school for a variety of reasons.

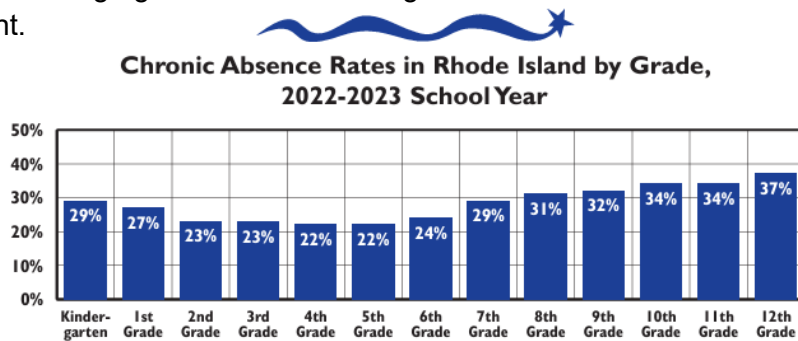
Asthma is a leading cause of school absenteeism, accounting for one-third of all absences, but other physical and behavioral health issues, including dental and vision problems, food insecurity, anxiety, and/or depression can also result in chronic absence.

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.

House Bill 8190 will improve transparency and accountability by implementing two key measures. First, it involves closely tracking absenteeism rates using data and implementing a tiered system of support to address student needs. Additionally, it emphasizes improving communication between students, parents, and legal guardians to identify and tackle the root causes of absenteeism and ensure that students receive adequate support through appropriate community-based services and interventions.

In Rhode Island 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. Chronic absence rates are high in kindergarten and first grade and then decline before increasing again in middle and high school when about one-third of students are chronically absent.



Source: Rhode Island Department of Education, 2022-2023 school year.

The effect of the COVID-19 pandemic continues to impact attendance in the hardest-hit communities, particularly among students from low-income communities and communities of color. In Rhode Island during the 2022-2023 school year, Native American (32%), Hispanic (39%), and Black (29%) K-12 students had higher rates of chronic absence than Asian (23%) and white (25%) students. Rates were also higher for Multilingual Learners (38%), low-income students (43%), and students receiving special education services (33%) than for all students (31%).

To address chronic absenteeism, schools, districts, and community partners can collaborate to foster a sense of belonging and connection for all students and families. Programs like home visiting programs, where caring adults establish trusting relationships with students and parents, have been proven successful in reducing absenteeism rates. For instance, Connecticut allocated \$10 million in federal COVID-relief funding to launch the Learning Engagement and Attendance Program (LEAP), in districts with high levels of chronic absenteeism, leading to promising results.

Districts such as Newport, Providence, and Woonsocket have established task forces or attendance teams to analyze data and develop district-wide strategies to address chronic absenteeism. Schools statewide have also adopted attendance teams, finding them crucial in reducing chronic absence.

Rhode Island KIDS COUNT supports the Governor's Attendance Matters campaign and serves on its related task force. For districts to be successful in addressing chronic absence we urge the Committee to consider how to ensure that districts have the funding they need to implement the various programs and services laid out in this bill.

We are dedicated to addressing the root causes of chronic absenteeism to ensure that all children are in school learning and thriving. Thank you for the leadership that this Committee has shown in addressing chronic absence and related issues during this session and previous ones and for the opportunity to testify today.