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PRESCHOOL ATTENDANCE MATTERS

A LOOK AT SCHOOL ABSENTEEISM IN MASSACHUSETTS PRE-K
PROGRAMS AND WHY WE NEED TO PAY ATTENTION TO IT

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Each year, about 7 million K–12 students—one in every six—miss more than three weeks of school,ⁱ representing a collective loss of 100 million days of learning. School absenteeism, however, is not uniform across all years of schooling. Absenteeism is highest during the early grades, falls during elementary school, and rises again during late middle school and high school.ⁱⁱ For years, researchers, policymakers, and practitioners have focused on absenteeism in the older grades, despite research showing that absenteeism during the early years has implications for academic achievement, social-emotional development, and later school attendance.ⁱⁱⁱ

When students are absent for a large number of days in preschool, they miss critical opportunities to learn. Students who are chronically absent in pre-K are also more likely to be chronically absent in subsequent years, suggesting that these patterns develop early for many students. Patterns of early absenteeism demonstrate a clear need to enhance efforts to reduce absenteeism in the early grades *before* longer-term patterns of absenteeism develop. In addition to preventing later absenteeism, these interventions will minimize the number of learning opportunities students miss during pre-K.

This brief examines patterns of absenteeism for students enrolled in public pre-K in the state of Massachusetts (MA). In examining these findings, it is important to note that public pre-K is not universal in MA, enrollment in pre-K is not required, and the pre-K population looks different from the overall public school population. Specifically, students with disabilities make up approximately one-third of the pre-K population in public schools—a figure that drops to 14% in kindergarten. One of the primary reasons for this large difference is because students with disabilities are guaranteed enrollment in public pre-K, which is not the case for students without disabilities. By analyzing data on students who were enrolled in public pre-K between 2011 and 2014,¹ this brief explores *the prevalence of absenteeism, the “who” and “where” of absenteeism, and how patterns of absenteeism progress from pre-K through the elementary years*. This brief concludes with a discussion of implications during and beyond pre-K for policymakers and practitioners.

Defining absenteeism and chronic absenteeism

Within this brief, *absenteeism* refers to the percentage of days a student was absent out of the total number of school days the student was enrolled. This brief does not differentiate between excused absences (e.g., absent with a doctor’s note) and unexcused absences (e.g., absent due to not being able to get to school). *Chronic absenteeism* refers to whether students’ absenteeism exceeded some threshold rate, thereby connoting risk for poorer outcomes.^{iv} In Massachusetts, this threshold is 10%—that is, students missing more than 10% of the school year, regardless of the type of absence, are considered chronically absent. For a 180-day school year, missing 10% of the school year translates to missing 18 school days, or approximately 1 month of school.

¹ Three academic years: 2011-2012, 2012-2013, 2013-2014

KEY TAKEAWAYS

1. **Finding:** Between 2011 and 2014, nearly 1 in 5 pre-K students (19%) was chronically absent (see Figure 1). Another 15% of pre-K students were on the cusp for chronic absenteeism (i.e., absent 6.6 to 10% of the school year).

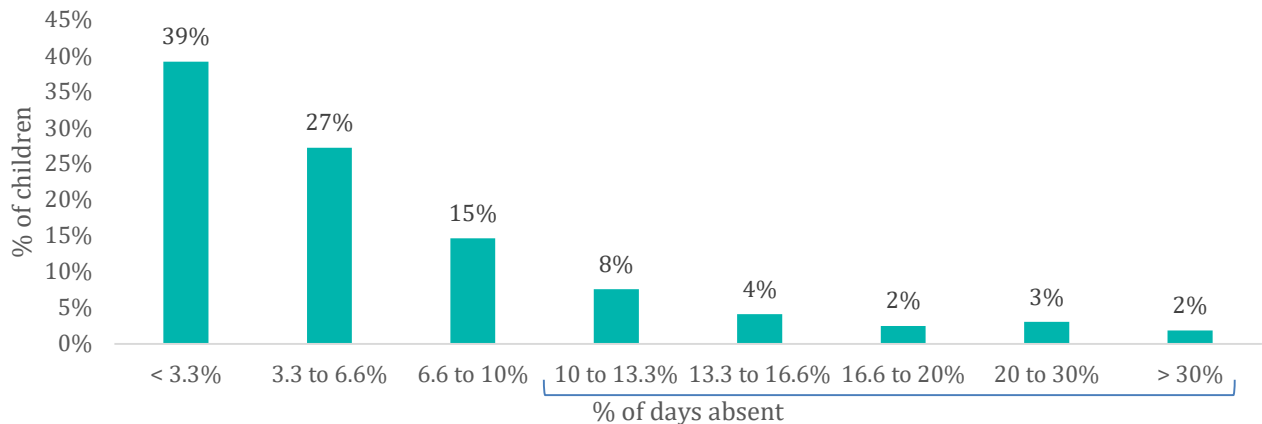


Figure 1. Breakdown of pre-K students by level of absenteeism in pre-K

2. **Finding:** Pre-K students were more likely to be chronically absent if they were non-White, low-income,² or an English learner, or if they had a disability (see Figure 2a and 2b). For example, 28% of low-income students were chronically absent, compared to 14% of non-low-income students. There were no statistically significant differences by student sex or whether students were enrolled in their first versus second year of pre-K.

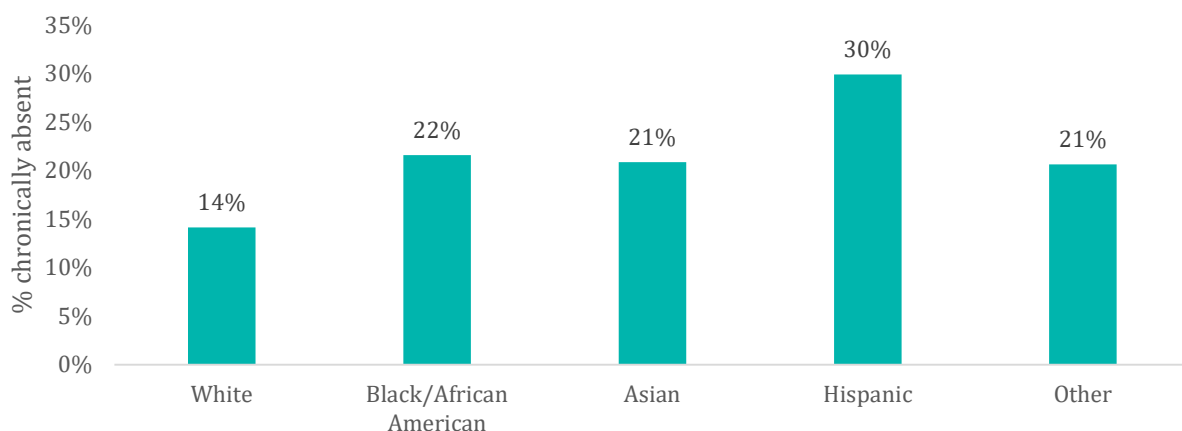


Figure 2a. Percent chronically absent in pre-K within each racial/ethnic group

² Low-income in this brief is equivalent to “economically disadvantaged” as defined by the [MA Department of Elementary and Secondary Education \(DESE\)](#). According to MA DESE, students are considered economically disadvantaged based on participation in at least one of the following state programs: the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP); the Transitional Assistance for Families with Dependent Children (TAFDC); the Department of Children and Families’ (DCF) foster care program; and MassHealth (Medicaid).

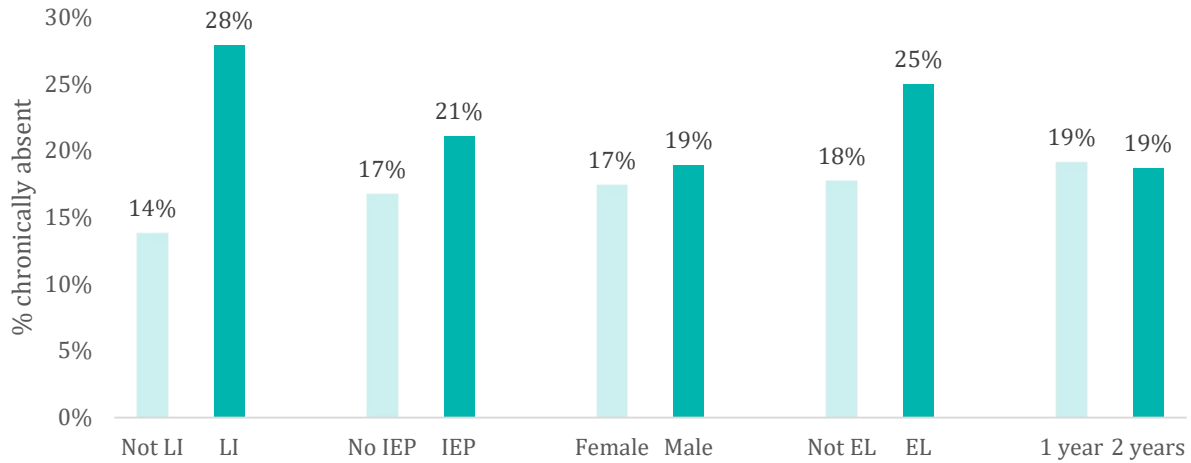


Figure 2b. Percent chronically absent in pre-K based on various student characteristics

Note: LI = low-income; IEP = Individualized Education Program; EL = English learner; 1 year = first year enrolled in public pre-K, 2 years = second year enrolled in public pre-K

- Finding:** Early chronic absenteeism was more prevalent among students enrolled in schools with more low-income students, higher student mobility rates, and fewer students meeting or exceeding proficiency on Massachusetts standardized tests (MCAS). These findings held above and beyond student-level characteristics (e.g., low-income, English learner, disability status, sex), suggesting that *context matters*. To further illuminate this finding, Figure 3 shows that a higher proportion of low-income students in a school is associated with higher levels of chronic absenteeism among pre-K students for *both* low-income and non-low-income students. Notably, non-low-income students enrolled in schools with more than 60% low-income students exhibited rates of chronic absenteeism (23%)³ similar to low-income students in schools with less than 40% low-income students.

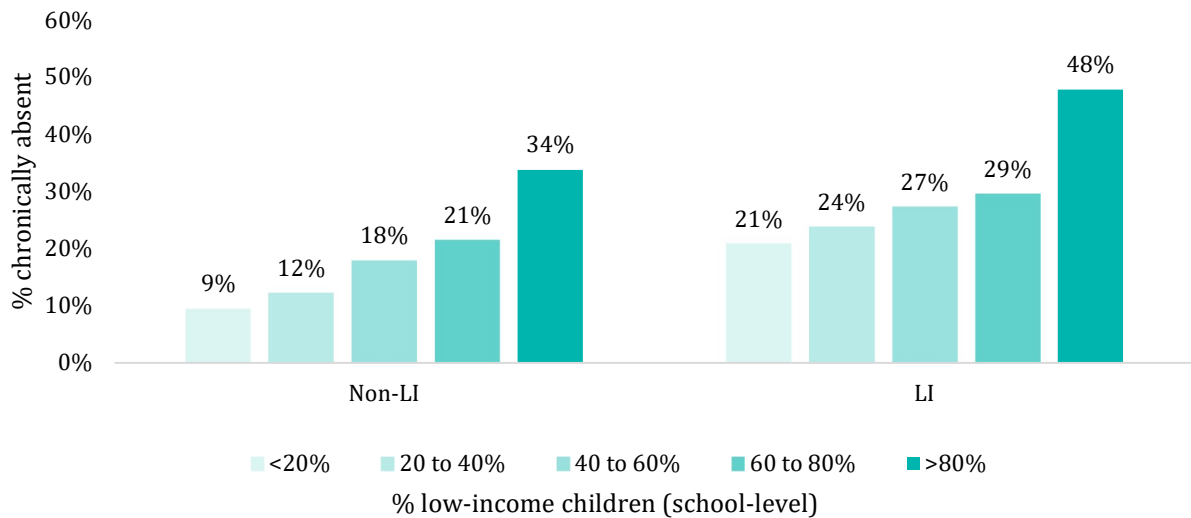


Figure 3. Percent chronically absent by student-level low-income status and by percentage of low-income students in the school

³ Chronic absenteeism rate for non-low-income students enrolled in schools with 60 to 80% and 80 to 100% low-income students

4. **Finding:** Among the 266 districts that offered public pre-K between 2011 and 2014, districts had an average of 15% of pre-K students who were chronically absent. There is considerable variability across districts, ranging from 0 to 58% of pre-K students who were chronically absent (see Figure 4). To some extent, this variability reflects variability in districts' approaches for providing public pre-K. For example, some large urban districts offer pre-K to all students, whereas some districts offer pre-K to all students with disabilities and use a lottery to fill the remaining pre-K slots.

Nonetheless, higher levels of chronic absenteeism were more prevalent in the southwest, central north, southeast (Cape Cod), and Boston metropolitan areas of Massachusetts. Among the 10 districts that exhibited the highest rates of chronic absenteeism during pre-K, 6 also had a percentage of low-income students that exceeded the state average (26%). Table 1 lists those 10 districts along with corresponding demographic characteristics of the student population.

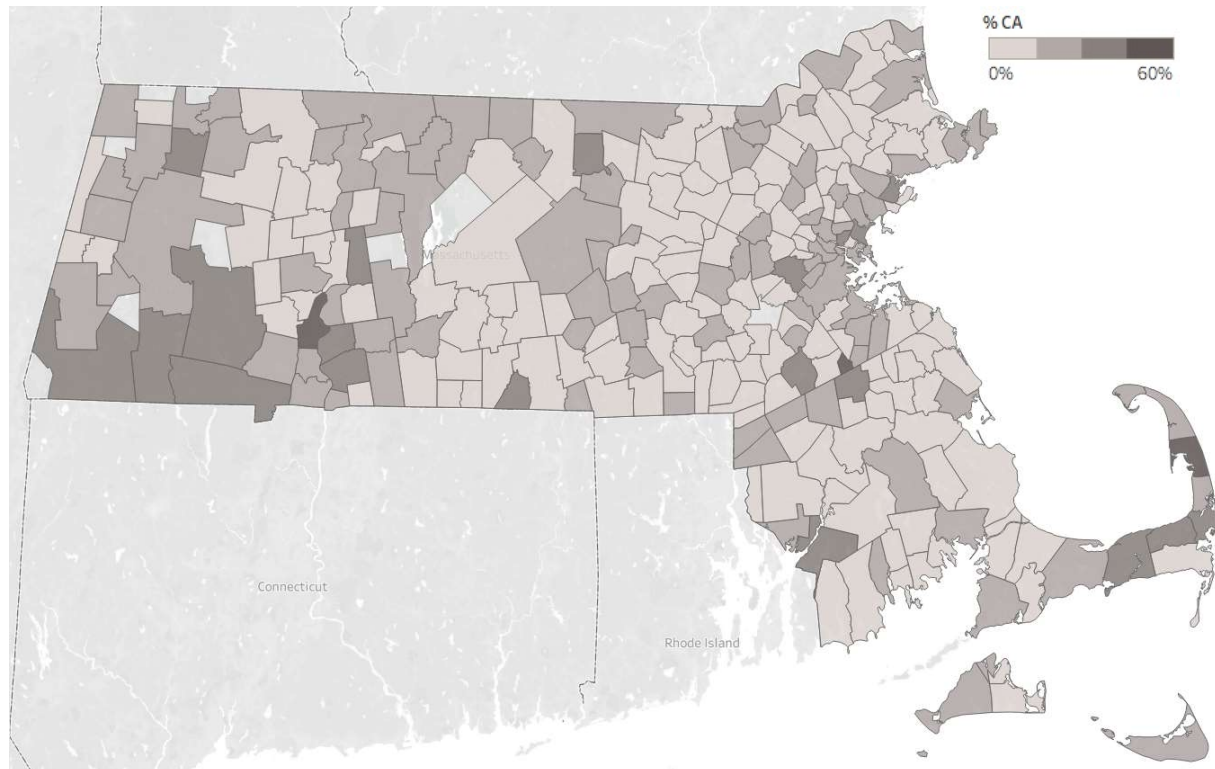


Figure 4. Distribution of chronic absenteeism during pre-K by district
Note. Darker colors represent districts with higher percentages of chronically absent pre-K students. Districts that are transparent represent districts without public pre-K.

Table 1. Characteristics of the pre-K to Grade 12 student population in districts with the highest percentages of chronically absent pre-K students in MA

District Name	Region	% CA	% EL	% SWD	% LI
Wellfleet	Cape Cod	58%	0%	15%	24%
Holyoke	Southwest	57%	29%	24%	67%
Avon	Southeast	55%	1%	15%	23%
Southbridge	Central	44%	17%	20%	61%
Southwick-Tolland-					
Granville	Southwest	40%	2%	19%	21%
Fall River	Southeast	40%	8%	19%	57%
Springfield	Southwest	39%	17%	20%	68%
Savoy	Northwest	39%	0%	22%	22%
Brockton	Southeast	39%	20%	14%	46%
Revere	Boston Metro	36%	16%	15%	37%
Statewide			9%	17%	26%

Note. Red text indicates that the demographic characteristics of these districts were higher than the statewide average.

CA = chronically absent; EL = English learner; SWD = students with disabilities; LI = low-income

- Finding:** Rates of chronic absenteeism decreased considerably in kindergarten and the early elementary school years (see Figure 5). However, students who were chronically absent in pre-K were more likely than their peers to be chronically absent in the following years. Moreover, initial differences in the prevalence of chronic absenteeism between low-income and non-low-income students, and students with IEPs and no IEPs, persisted beyond the pre-K year.

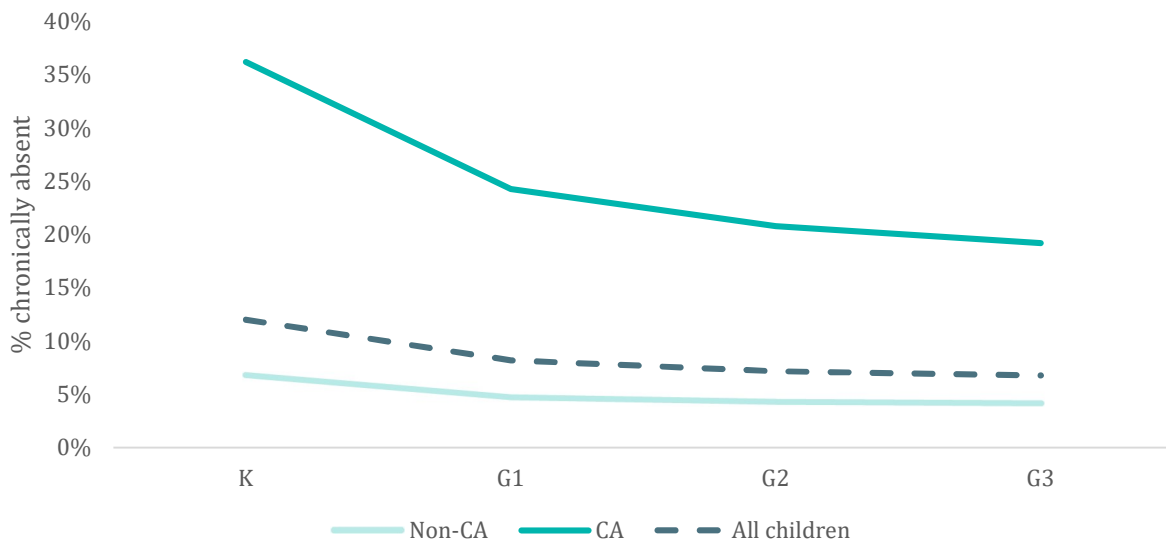


Figure 5. Percent of days absent in subsequent grades based on whether the student was chronically absent in pre-K

Implications: What does this mean for policymakers and practitioners?

Under the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), 37 states, including MA, incorporated a measure of student absenteeism in state accountability plans to meet the policy's requirement of including an indicator capturing school quality or student success. These plans do not factor pre-K absenteeism into accountability measures. As such, attention and efforts to reduce school absenteeism are primarily placed on grades K-12. Yet, these findings suggest that absenteeism is very high in pre-K, and that students who are chronically absent during pre-K are also more likely to be chronically absent in the subsequent years. As a result, the pre-K year is an optimal time to intervene before patterns of absenteeism are set and before students miss significant instructional time and opportunities to learn.

School and district leaders need to pay attention to and address chronic absenteeism during and beyond pre-K. Potential actions to address absenteeism include the following:

- Examine the prevalence of absenteeism at the school level. Although chronic absenteeism is more likely to manifest for pre-K students enrolled in schools with high proportions of low-income students and lower overall standardized test scores, not all such schools exhibit high overall chronic absenteeism. Therefore, it is important for individual schools to examine the prevalence of absenteeism within their schools. Schools with generally high rates of chronic absenteeism should consider more universal, school-based approaches for addressing this issue.
- Promote data capacity in schools and districts to identify when chronic absenteeism may be more prevalent. One study found that absenteeism was highest during the winter months and around holiday breaks for students enrolled in Head Start.^v Knowing whether these—or different—patterns hold among students can support increased efforts to promote attendance around those periods of time (e.g., via check-ins with parents to discuss plans for upcoming school breaks).
- Promote data capacity in schools and districts to identify who may be at risk for chronic absenteeism throughout the school year. For example, one study found that elementary-aged students who were absent more frequently during the fall were also more likely to be absent during the spring.^{vi} School and district leaders can use these findings to target efforts toward students who are more likely to be chronically absent over the entire school year based on the number of fall absences.

This brief demonstrates the extent of the problem but does not examine why pre-K students are absent. School and district leaders should seek to understand what drives absenteeism during pre-K. In doing so, they will be better prepared to implement interventions that target the roots of absenteeism in their schools and districts. For example, if a lack of reliable transportation is a primary reason for missing school and this issue affects many students, the school can work to find more reliable modes of transportation or provide bus services. One way schools can acquire this information is through a parent survey that asks parents about various topics, like the number of children in their household, the mode of transportation used to get to school, and reasons why children miss school.^{vii}

Based on the challenges and barriers identified in their own environments, school and district leaders should consider implementing interventions that have shown promise in other places and grade levels. Intervening early could have both short-term benefits (e.g., exposure to instructional

time and learning opportunities during the pre-K year) and long-term benefits (e.g., creating a strong foundation for positive attendance behaviors). However, it is critical that leaders adapt these interventions in ways that meet the needs of the student and family population. Example interventions include the following:

- Low-touch “nudge” interventions such as mailing notices to parents have effectively reduced absenteeism. In an effort to target parents’ underestimations of their children’s total number of absences, one mailing strategy provided parents with information about the actual number of absences accumulated—reducing chronic absenteeism by 10%.^{viii} Additionally, a texting intervention targeting parents’ beliefs about attendance, (e.g., highlighting the role of attendance for students’ learning) and goal setting (e.g., meeting some attendance threshold each month) reduced chronic absenteeism by 20%.^{ix} Although this intervention targeted students between kindergarten and grade 12, its efficacy across so many grades suggests that it may also be an effective strategy during pre-K. These examples not only highlight the potential of these low-touch “nudge” interventions, but also the promise of correcting inaccurate estimates of students’ previous absences.
- Improving family engagement practices has also shown promise for reducing absenteeism. Especially during pre-K, when parents may be more likely to drop off and pick up their children than in later grades, daily points of contact create opportunities for fostering engagement and building relationships and trust between families, teachers, and administrators. In one family engagement intervention targeting low-income kindergarten students, a school staff member texted parents about a range of topics, including student absences as well as upcoming school events.^x Moreover, the staff member connected parents with local resources and services, which could target some of the barriers to attendance experienced by these families. After implementing this intervention for one school year, only 13% of students in intervention schools were chronically absent relative to 24% of students in non-intervention schools.

These interventions are primarily school-based, and school and district leaders should also consider solutions outside of schools given that many reasons for absenteeism are rooted in issues such as poor health and housing instability. Partnering with community organizations (such as health clinics or housing authorities) and connecting children and families with these organizations may be another effective approach for directly addressing the roots of absenteeism.^{xi}

Finally, the Commonwealth should consider embedding pre-K school absenteeism into the broader early warning systems that K-12 educators use to identify students at risk of falling behind. It is important to note that not *every* student who is chronically absent in pre-K is also chronically absent in subsequent years. However, improving identification of students who may be more likely to exhibit poorer academic and attendance outcomes later on can help school leaders engage in more personalized outreach from an earlier age.



Conclusion

In Massachusetts, 1 in 5 students enrolled in public pre-K is chronically absent (i.e., absent >10% of the school year). In addition, chronic absenteeism more frequently manifests among pre-K students who are non-White, low-income, or English learners, or who have a disability. Students who are chronically absent are more likely to attend schools with higher proportions of low-income students, greater student turnover, and lower standardized test scores. Finally, although overall rates of chronic absenteeism decrease over the course of the elementary school years, students who are chronically absent during pre-K are also more likely to be chronically absent in subsequent years. As a result of these findings, a number of steps are provided for state, district, and school leaders to consider in order to reduce absenteeism and support all students' short- and long-term learning and development.

ⁱ US Department of Education, 2019

ⁱⁱ Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012; Ehrlich et al., 2018; Gottfried & Hutt, 2019; MA Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2019

ⁱⁱⁱ Ansari & Purtell, 2018; Dubay & Holla, 2016; Ehrlich et al., 2018; Gottfried, 2014

^{iv} Gottfried, 2014

^v Katz et al., 2015

^{vi} Gottfried, 2017

^{vii} Katz et al., 2015

^{viii} Rogers & Feller, 2018

^{ix} Kalil et al., 2019

^x Smythe-Leistico & Page, 2018

^{xi} Chang & Romero, 2008