Empty Seats: Enrollment and Chronic Absenteeism in Rhode Island’s Public K-12 Schools

Executive Summary
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This report uses newly available data to help explain why there are so many more empty seats in Rhode Island public school classrooms today than just a few years ago. It gives greater context to the related trends of declining enrollment and increased rates of absenteeism by drawing on national comparative data, policy research, and historical analysis. Based on its findings, RIPEC offers policy recommendations for consideration by state and local policymakers.

In Rhode Island, there are significantly more empty seats in public school classrooms today than there were before the COVID-19 pandemic. This is true in two respects. First, the state has experienced a substantial decline in public school enrollment since the 2019-20 school year, amounting to a loss of about one in every twenty students statewide and as many as one in six students in some districts. Second, the rates at which enrolled students are chronically absent—defined as having missed at least ten percent of the school year, or 18 days—have increased markedly since before the pandemic, standing at over one quarter (28.9 percent) of all students in the 2022-23 school year, compared to 19.1 percent in 2018-19. The proportion of students who missed far more than ten percent of the school year also has grown substantially, with nearly one-in-ten students (9.0 percent) missing at least 20 percent of the school year in 2022-23, compared to about one-in-twenty students in 2018-19 (5.5 percent).

This phenomenon of empty seats recently has received significant public attention, with the greater focus on chronic absenteeism. At the beginning of the 2022-23 school year, the Rhode Island Department of Education (RIDE) launched a new webpage with online resources to raise public awareness of the importance of regular attendance. That effort has since been expanded, with Governor Dan McKee announcing the “Attendance Matters RI” campaign in early November of this year. Absenteeism and enrollment also have been the subject of reports by public policy research and advocacy groups, including RIPEC, as well as various media outlets.

There is a lot we still do not know, however. Early in the 2020-21 school year, local and state leaders articulated the need to understand why enrollment had fallen. Yet while enrollment has continued to decline, we still do not know where all the state’s missing students have gone or their reasons for leaving. In contrast, there was surprisingly little public attention paid to chronic absenteeism prior to the beginning of the current school year (2023-24), and there remains a lack of information as to why chronic absenteeism rates grew so substantially in Rhode Island, and across the country, in recent years.

The COVID-19 pandemic had a large and lingering effect on public school enrollment in Rhode Island. The state experienced an unprecedented enrollment decline between October 2019 and October 2020—exceeding 4,000 students (3.0 percent). Three years on, the state not only has not
recovered this loss but experienced continued declines in enrollment, totaling over 7,000 students (5.2 percent) between 2019 and 2023. District public schools, where enrollment declines were concentrated, experienced a 7.9 percent drop in enrollment over this period, and some districts experienced far greater declines, with South Kingstown (18.5 percent decline), Providence (16.7 percent), and Westerly (16.4 percent) posting the state’s greatest losses.

To some extent, this enrollment loss can be attributed to population decline, but data also shows that many students left the system to pursue other education opportunities—like homeschooling, which grew by about 1,500 children between October 2019 and 2020 (a 75.9 percent increase). At the same time, some students are no longer pursuing any educational opportunity; Rhode Island’s dropout rate in 2021-22 increased by two percentage points over the prior year and was higher than at any point since the 2011-12 school year.

In addition to the seats made empty by declining enrollment, the proportion of chronically absent students statewide increased from 19.1 percent in 2018-19 to 28.9 percent in 2022-23. Nominally, this represents over 38,000 chronically absent students in 2022-23. In addition, over 12,000 of these students missed at least one in five school days. Preliminary data from the first few months of the current school year (2023-24) suggest that chronic absenteeism rates are trending downward, but it remains unclear whether this trend will continue throughout the school year.

While chronic absenteeism rates were already greater for students from historically disadvantaged subgroups than their peers before the pandemic, the gap has grown wider in most instances, and particularly in the case of economically disadvantaged students, Hispanic students, and multilingual learners. In 2022-23, well over one-in-three students belonging to one of these subgroups missed at least ten percent of the school year and about one-in-seven missed at least 20 percent of the school year. Elementary and middle school students, while still less likely to be chronically absent than high school students, also saw higher increases than for high schoolers. In 2022-23, 24.8 percent of elementary school students and 28.5 percent of middle school students were chronically absent.

The pandemic was critical in bringing these dramatic changes to Rhode Island’s system of public education, but neither declining enrollment nor high levels of absenteeism are exclusively the product of the pandemic. Enrollment was relatively stable prior to 2019, but a 2017 RIDE analysis projected that enrollment would decrease through 2026 at an average annual rate of 0.4 percent. For some districts—and particularly beach or “second home” communities in Washington and Newport County—this decline was projected to be greater due primarily to large declines in the number of resident school-aged children. For other districts—primarily urban core districts in Providence County—both projected and recent decreases in enrollment have largely been driven by resident students choosing public education options outside of their district. In Providence, for instance, increased charter school enrollment amounted to nearly half (47.8 percent) of the district’s 16.7 percent enrollment decline between 2019 and 2023. Even in some districts where enrollment decline has been driven primarily by demographic shifts, significant numbers of students and families have made the choice to leave their resident district school.

Likewise, Rhode Island’s rate of chronic absenteeism was a critical problem before the pandemic. About one-in-five students were chronically absent statewide in 2018-2019, and students from historically disadvantaged subgroups and in the state’s urban core experienced significantly higher rates of chronic absenteeism, with over one-in-three Providence and Woonsocket students
chronically absent. Rhode Island’s elevated chronic absenteeism rates since 2018-19 track with national and regional trends, but Rhode Island already faced a steeper challenge than most other states given its historically high pre-pandemic levels of chronic absenteeism. A U.S. Department of Education study from 2015-16 found that Rhode Island’s rate of chronic absenteeism was the nation’s fourth highest, and much higher than other New England states. A 2022-23 survey of the chronic absenteeism data of 28 states and Washington D.C. found that Rhode Island continues to experience relatively high rates of chronic absenteeism, though the gap has closed somewhat, with the Ocean State ranking 8th highest.

Empty seats in public school classrooms are hardly a new problem and there have long been state and local efforts to better fill classrooms nationally and in Rhode Island. The history of public education demonstrates that compulsory education laws were realized through a series of forces, the greatest arguably being a decline in available work requiring non-skilled manual labor, which led to the development of a clear value proposition for students and families. The development of Truancy Court programs also was used to enforce compulsory education laws, but as rates of chronic absenteeism have grown sharply in the last few years, referrals to Truancy Court programs in Rhode Island have ironically decreased; between 2019 and 2022, the number of Truancy Court referrals fell statewide by over a third (36.1 percent) while the number of students who missed at least one in five school days roughly doubled.

In Rhode Island, efforts to mitigate chronic absenteeism predate the pandemic. The state began annually reporting on chronic absenteeism in the early 2010s and added the metric to its federal Every Student Succeeds Act accountability framework in 2016-17. The state also developed data tools—the Attendance Nudge Tool and the Student Attendance Leaderboard—to aid local educators and administrators, and some districts, particularly in the urban core, worked to mitigate chronic absenteeism through initiatives such as walking school buses. More recently, the statewide response to chronic absenteeism has focused primarily on drawing greater public attention to the issue. In addition, RIDE has worked to make absenteeism data both more readily available and consistent, and some LEAs have aggressively implemented strategies to reduce rates of chronic absenteeism. Most notable in this regard is Central Falls, which reduced its chronic absenteeism rate from 48.2 percent in 2021-22 to 29.6 percent in 2022-23 with a strategy centered around prioritizing attendance at the community level, establishing clear lines of authority, effectively using data, and training family and community teams to conduct phone calls and home visits.

Despite Rhode Island’s historical and recent focus on better filling empty seats, there remain significant gaps in our knowledge base, in part due to insufficient data. For one, we do not know precisely where the students who left the system have gone, and tracking that loss is complicated by the fact that independent and Catholic schools have not historically been compelled to submit attendance data annually requested by RIDE, leading to an inconsistent and largely unreliable data set for these students. Additionally, available data does not reveal why so many more students are absent than before the pandemic and why, both historically and presently, chronic absenteeism presents a bigger problem in Rhode Island than in the nation or region.

Given the findings outlined above, RIPEC makes the following recommendations to state and local policymakers:

Recent efforts to raise public awareness and prioritize the reduction of chronic absenteeism should continue to be advanced by the state, to help local leaders deliver and
reinforce that message. The McKee administration’s recent efforts to draw public attention to the problem of chronic absenteeism and positively reinforce good attendance are considered best practice among experts in the field. Additionally, SurveyWorks data showing that some students and their families underestimate the importance of regular attendance suggests that there is room for better public education. Given that students and families interact most frequently about school issues with the teachers and administrators in their school building, it is important that this campaign focuses on effectively deploying this message at the school level.

The state should invest in programs in partnership with LEAs to establish and expand local initiatives, such as data-driven home visiting programs, that reduce chronic absenteeism. Several LEAs have already developed strategies to reduce rates of chronic absenteeism, and a few seem to be yielding significant improvement. RIDE has developed tools to help LEAs in these efforts, but LEA initiatives nevertheless operate in effective silos. The General Assembly should invest in a state program that facilitates and coordinates local-level programs that follow evidence-driven strategies for mitigating chronic absenteeism. The state also should consider dedicated funding, such as a matching grants program, to help districts scale up programs to reduce chronic absenteeism. In this regard, the state could contribute funds to train school leaders in administering data-driven home visiting programs—a strategy that has been shown to be effective in reducing rates of absenteeism in Connecticut public schools. A similar program also seems to have proven successful in lowering absenteeism levels in Central Falls.

The state should work to improve its enrollment data and better clarify what enrollment losses mean for all Rhode Island children, including those who have left the public education system. To accurately capture how students statewide are being educated in public, private, and home settings, effective data collection must be required. Given that RIDE grants approval for private schools to operate on an annual basis, it is arguably already within its power to require collection and reporting of private school enrollment data; otherwise, the General Assembly should clarify or extend this additional authority to RIDE. Moving forward, RIDE also should consider adding aggregated exit data to the list of data sets it publishes annually to provide a better understanding of enrollment shifts. For their part, LEAs should aggressively pursue accuracy in exit data collection so that all children, including those who have left the system, inform state and local responses to enrollment decline.

The state should improve the accuracy of chronic absenteeism data by setting a standard definition of attendance and RIDE should seek to improve data collection to better understand why students are chronically absent. The state should develop a standard definition of attendance so that all LEAs are required to mark students who are tardy or dismissed early in the same fashion. To better understand why students are chronically absent, RIDE should improve data collection, including possible revisions to SurveyWorks. RIDE should additionally work with LEAs to revise the state’s system of coding the reason for student absences so that data can be collected with uniformity, and better inform state and local responses to chronic absenteeism.

State policymakers should pursue a comprehensive review of the role of Truancy Courts and recommend reforms to the system. The education establishment has shifted its focus away from truancy and towards chronic absenteeism and has increasingly relied on strategies like positive reinforcement and family assistance to improve student attendance. At the same time, schools increasingly have disfavored referrals to Truancy Court as a tool to compel better
attendance, evidenced by historically low levels of Truancy Court referrals in the last few years despite historically high rates of absenteeism. Policymakers should undertake a comprehensive review of the role of Truancy Courts in Rhode Island to determine both if the system could be more fairly administered and the extent to which Truancy Court referrals should remain a tool of the compulsory education system.

**Public education in the state needs to be improved so that students have better reason to enroll in, and regularly attend, school.** While the story of enrollment decline in Rhode Island is complex, a major takeaway is that large numbers of students and families are choosing to leave urban school districts with the lowest student outcomes. Even in districts outside the urban core, where enrollment decline has been driven primarily by a decrease in the school-aged population, significant numbers of students and families also are making the choice to leave their resident district school. In addition, SurveyWorks data suggests that a proportion of students have been absent from school because they do not see the value in attending. The history of compulsory education shows that universal K-12 education was achieved because the value proposition of public education was clear to children and their families. However, too often today our public district schools, and especially our urban core schools, are failing to effectively make that case.

This report includes several figures which present enrollment and absenteeism data across districts and demographic subgroups. These figures are presented in a data dashboard that allows for users to customize the data and visualizations based on their needs and interests, [here](#).