

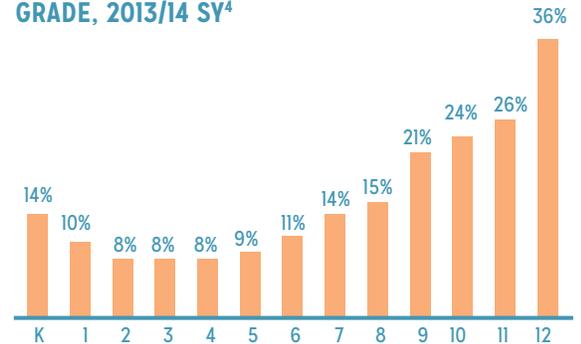


School attendance in the early years is crucial for Mississippi's students to achieve their full educational potential. Missing school during the kindergarten and first grade years may seem inconsequential. Some may believe that because children have a lifetime of school ahead, missing a few days here and there will have little or no effect on later achievement. Yet when kindergartners and first-graders miss two or more days of school per month, they are less equipped to read as third and eighth graders.¹ As educators in Mississippi and across the nation work to improve student academic outcomes, it is important to examine the effects that early chronic absence can have on children's later success.

Chronic absence is defined as missing 10% or more of a given school year.² In a school year comprised of 180 days, chronically absent students miss 18 days—nearly one month of learning. An estimated 10% of kindergartners and first graders are chronically absent each year in America,³ but this number could be as high as 15%.¹ In Mississippi, 15% of public school students were chronically absent during the 2013/2014 school year.⁴ National trends show high rates of absence in kindergarten and first grade, which drop in elementary school and increase throughout middle and high school.⁵ Mississippi students mirror these trends. The latest data released by the Mississippi Department of Education (MDE) reveals that in 2013/2014, 14% of kindergarten students and 36% of 12th grade students were chronically absent.⁴

It is important to note that chronic absence is not the same as average daily attendance (ADA), which is the average number of enrolled students who attend school each day. In Mississippi, excused and unexcused absences are calculated using ADA. Each school's ADA shows how many students are present each day on average, but does not give an indication of how many students are struggling with chronic absence. Therefore, even in schools that have 95% ADA, large numbers of students could still be chronically absent each month.⁶ In fact, among Mississippi school districts with an ADA of 95% or higher, over half have chronic absence rates greater than 10% and several as high as 13%. For example, even though Newton County school district had an ADA of 95%, 13% of its students were chronically absent during the 2013-14 school year. Chronic absence is not truancy, which is willful absence from school without adult permission.⁶ In Mississippi, truancy is defined as the percentage of students with five or more unlawful or unexcused absences in the school year. Truancy does not capture the percentage of young students who are absent with parental permission.

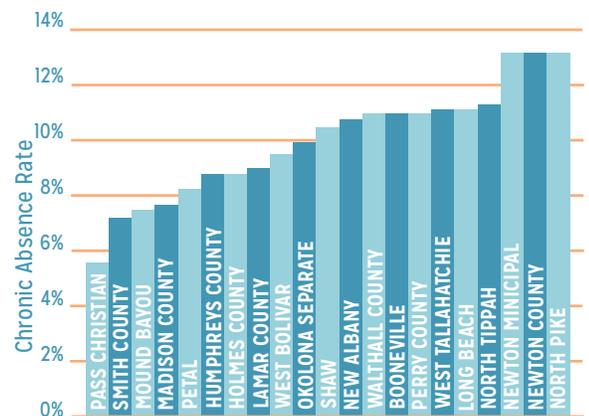
CHRONIC ABSENCE RATES IN MISSISSIPPI BY GRADE, 2013/14 SY⁴



Chronic absence rates start high in kindergarten, decrease through elementary school years, and increase again in middle and high school. During the 2013/14 school year, 14% of kindergartners, 15% of 8th graders, and 36% of 12th graders were chronically absent.

Based on a previous report by Mississippi KIDS COUNT using state- and district-level data. The current report expands on these results by using student-level data to investigate the effects of chronic absence on student outcomes.

CHRONIC ABSENCE RATES FOR MS SCHOOL DISTRICTS WITH AN ADA OF 95% OR GREATER



MEASURES OF ATTENDANCE

- ✓ **Average Daily Attendance (ADA):** Average number of enrolled students who attend school each day. In Mississippi, excused and unexcused absences are included in ADA.
- ✓ **Chronic Absence Rate:** Percentage of students who miss too much school for any reason including excused and unexcused absences. Reflecting numerous studies and the practices of a growing number of states, this report defines it as missing 10% of the school year (about 18 days in a 180 school year).
- ✓ **Truancy Rate:** In Mississippi, truancy is defined as the percentage of students with **five or more unlawful or unexcused absences** in the school year. The truancy rate does not include out of school suspensions.

MISSISSIPPI STUDENTS ELIGIBLE FOR FREE/REDUCED LUNCH WERE MORE LIKELY TO MISS 3 OR MORE DAYS IN MONTH PRIOR TO TESTING⁸



source: NAEP Data Explorer

Low income students who often face multiple barriers (unstable housing, insufficient health care, unreliable transportation) are more likely to be chronically absent.⁷ According to results from the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP), a standardized test given every two years to a national sample of fourth and eighth graders, 24% of Mississippi students who were eligible for free and reduced lunch reported missing three or more days of school during the month of the exam, compared to 15% of students who were not eligible.⁸ Chronically absent students are more likely to be students of color.⁷ However, in Mississippi, this trend is reversed with 17% percent of white students being chronically absent compared to 14% of black students during the 2013/14 school year.⁴ Asian students attending Mississippi public schools have the lowest rate of chronic absence at 7% percent.

SEPTEMBER ABSENCES IN MISSISSIPPI SCHOOLS CAN PREDICT ABSENCES FOR THE YEAR

Attendance patterns exhibited early in the year often predict behaviors later in the school year. In 2014, the Baltimore Education Research Consortium reviewed attendance patterns of students enrolled in Baltimore city schools and found that students who missed between two and four days during the month of September were five times more likely to be chronically absent over the whole school year than those who missed fewer than two days.⁹ Students who missed more than four days in September continued to miss between six and nine days per month.⁹

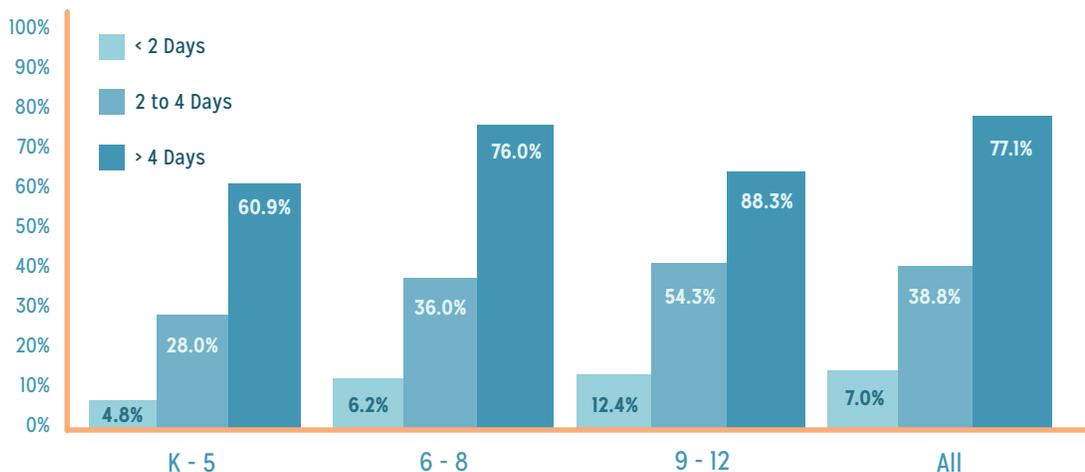
DAYS MISSED IN SEPTEMBER FOR MISSISSIPPI STUDENTS

	< 2 Days	2 to 4 Days	> 4 Days
K - 5	83.1%	15.1%	1.9%
6 - 8	82.0%	15.7%	2.4%
9 - 12	74.6%	20.7%	4.7%
ALL	80.6%	16.6%	2.8%

For the first time, researchers at Mississippi KIDS COUNT used student-level data to examine whether these same patterns held true in Mississippi's public schools. Using longitudinal data provided by the Mississippi Department of Education, researchers found that students who missed less than two days in September had the lowest rate of chronic absence for the year (7%), compared to those who missed either two to four days (38.8%) or more than four days (77.1%). These findings suggest that attendance patterns in September set the stage for attendance for the entire year.

It is important to note that students can become chronically absent in subsequent months. Challenges can come at any time of the year. In addition to tracking, monitoring, and intervening starting in August and September, schools should pay close attention to attendance patterns of individual students throughout the year.

PERCENT CHRONIC ABSENCE IN MISSISSIPPI BY DAYS MISSED IN SEPTEMBER, 2013/14*



Mississippi students who missed between 2 to 4 days in September were **5X** more likely to be chronically absent for the year than those who missed less than two days.

This figure shows the percentage of chronically absent students in the 2013/14 school year by their number of absences in September. High school students (9 - 12) generally had the highest number of absences in September, followed by middle school students (6 - 8), and elementary school students (K - 5). Across grade levels, students who missed less than two days in September had the lowest rate of chronic absence for the year (7%), compared to those who missed either two to four days (38.8%) or more than four days (77.1%).

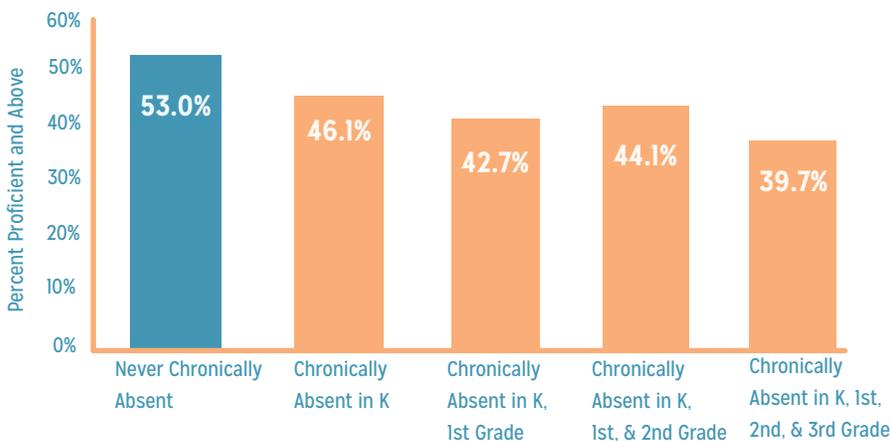
*Note: These analyses do not include students who either enrolled or withdrew within the school year.

CHRONIC ABSENCE IN MISSISSIPPI IMPACTS STUDENT SUCCESS

In recent years, there has been an emphasis on the importance of reading proficiency by third grade. By the end of the third grade, students should transition from “learning to read” to “reading to learn” to ensure future academic success. Third grade achievement is a predictor of high school graduation.¹⁰ In a 2011 study of students in two California counties, it was found that chronic absence in kindergarten and/or first grade is linked to lower scores on third grade reading and language arts tests.^{5, 11} While 41% of students chronically absent in either kindergarten or first grade were able to read on grade level in third grade, only 17% of students chronically absent in both kindergarten and first grade were able to read on grade level.⁵ Although the effects were not as pronounced for math achievement, chronically absent students scored lower on math tests than their non-chronically absent peers.¹¹

The same holds true for Mississippi third graders. When analyzing test score data from the Mississippi Curriculum Test, Second Edition (MCT2), Mississippi KIDS COUNT researchers determined that students who were not chronically absent in early grades (K - 3) were more likely to be proficient in third grade language arts than those who were chronically absent at some point between kindergarten and third grade. Over half (53%) of those who were never chronically absent during their K - 3 years scored proficient or above compared to 40% of those who were persistently chronically absent prior to taking the third grade MCT test. However, the results show that early chronic absence can have lasting effects on student achievement as even those who were absent in kindergarten, but no other years had lower proficiency than those who were never chronically absent (46% vs. 53%).

STUDENTS PROFICIENT AND ABOVE IN 3RD GRADE LANGUAGE ARTS BY ATTENDANCE IN K - 3*



This figure shows the percentage of 3rd graders who were proficient or above on the 2013/14 MCT2 Language Arts assessment by their pattern of attendance during their kindergarten through third grade years. The blue bar on the far left represents the proficiency level of students who were never chronically absent during grades K - 3. The next bar represents the proficiency level of students who were chronically absent in kindergarten only. The following three bars each represent the proficiency level of students who were chronically absent in consecutive years through grade three.

When school administrators track attendance data early in the year, they are afforded the opportunity to intervene before students fall too far behind. Individual improvement plans can be developed, and parents can be made more aware of the importance of attendance. Community and parental engagement are essential in understanding that good attendance can positively impact academic achievement. Begun in May 2010, the Campaign for Grade Level Reading is one initiative aimed at increasing the number of children from low-income families who are reading proficiently by 2020 by addressing some of the barriers to success: school readiness, summer reading loss, and chronic absence.¹² It is a collaborative effort of funders, nonprofit partners, states and communities from across the country. The city of Gulfport and Lafayette County are members of the Grade Level Reading Network.

Across the state, school administrators and parents can work together to identify students at risk due to attendance starting from the very beginning of the school year and continuing throughout the following months. Using real-time attendance data will allow interventions to be developed before children have missed so much school that they are academically behind. Absences in the prior school year should also be studied to predict who might be at risk. With early identification and increased supports, all of Mississippi's students have a fair chance to reach their potential and contribute to society.

ACTION PLANS FOR STAKEHOLDERS

- ✓ **Encourage schools** to pay attention to August/September attendance and even prior school year absences so that interventions can be implemented for students at-risk for chronic absence before it becomes problematic.
- ✓ **Create** school attendance **awareness** campaigns to inform education professionals, parents, and students why attendance matters.
- ✓ **Cultivate community involvement** in increasing school attendance through community-wide campaigns.
- ✓ **Address the need** to help schools understand and use multiple metrics, not just average daily attendance (ADA) to gauge attendance statistics.
- ✓ **Support** the use of student-level absence data to determine school absence statistics.
- ✓ **Develop** a state-wide system to capture the reasons why students are absent.

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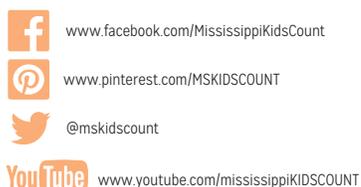
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*DATA NOTES

Data was provided by the Mississippi Department of Education (MDE) for the 2002/03 to 2013/14 school years. Data for the 2014/15 school year is not yet available. The analyses for September absences and student achievement do not include students who either enrolled or withdrew within the school year. However, over 95% of the student population was included in the analysis.

Chronic absence was calculated by summing students' absences for each school year. Students with 18 or more absences for a given school year were considered chronically absent.

Average Daily Attendance (ADA) is reported from the MDE's Mississippi Student Information System (MSIS) for months 1-9. ADA is the average number of students present each day that school was in session during a given time frame. An average daily attendance rate was calculated by dividing districts' 2013/14 ADA by their 2013/14 membership.



The Mississippi KIDS COUNT program is made possible, in part, through grants from the Annie E. Casey Foundation and Mississippi State University's Division of Agriculture, Forestry and Veterinary Medicine. This work is carried out through the Family and Children Research Unit, a division of the Social Science Research Center.