

Absenteeism Issue Brief

Lost Days: Patterns and Levels of Chronic Absenteeism Among Baltimore City Public School Students 1999-00 to 2005-06

Introduction. Regular school attendance is a fundamental but often overlooked factor in school and community success. Students who are chronically absent and miss one-ninth or more of the school year - a month or more - are missing out on critical learning opportunities. It is difficult to understand how students who are severely chronically absent and miss two-ninths or more of a school year can keep up with their studies. Recent research in Chicago and Philadelphia has documented that poor attendance is a primary driver of course failure in the secondary grades, and that course failure is at the root of high dropout rates.

If chronic absenteeism is widespread it will also impact students who are not absent. When significant numbers of students in a class are missing a great deal of instructional time, a teacher has a no-win choice. Either instruction can be slowed down for the whole class to provide time and opportunities to help absent students catch up when they return, or a teacher can maintain normal instructional pace and soon end up with large numbers of lost students. These lost students, in turn, may respond in frustration by withdrawing and giving up, or acting out and causing further missed instructional time.

One reason why attendance problems sometimes receive less attention than they deserve is that the most common way of reporting attendance, i.e., average school-wide attendance rates, can fail to reveal significant issues. It is possible to have school-wide average attendance in the 90 percent range, but have 15 percent of students chronically absent each year, and 40 percent of students experiencing chronic absenteeism at least once over multiple years. By following individual students over time, as we do for students who started both the first and sixth grade in Baltimore City Public Schools in 1999-00, it is possible to examine the extent, year-by-year trends, intensity, and cumulative effects of chronic absenteeism.

The following brief draws on analyses of attendance data conducted for reports on the First- and Sixth-Grade Cohorts produced by researchers from Johns Hopkins University and Morgan State University. Those reports are to be considered demonstration projects, or precursors to the work of the Baltimore Educational Research Consortium (BERC). The present brief uses data from both the First- and Sixth-Grade Cohorts to look at the patterns and extent of chronic absenteeism across grades 1 to 12 in BCPSS from 1999-00 to 2005-06.

What the analysis demonstrates is that chronic absenteeism presents a significant challenge to classroom instruction and student learning rates in the primary grades (1st-5th). Roughly a third of students in the first-grade cohort were chronically absent at least once during their first five years in BCPSS.

By the early secondary grades (6th and 10th) chronic absenteeism reached epidemic levels. At the very least, missing significant amounts of school became the norm for BCPSS students between the 6th and 12th grade. Two-thirds of the sixth-grade cohort were chronically absent at least once over a five year period. Even more troubling was that nearly half of the students were *severely* chronically absent, i.e., missing two or more months of schooling in at least one year.

Not surprisingly, there was a strong connection between chronic absenteeism and dropping out. Perhaps surprisingly, though, there was significant chronic absenteeism in the 10th, 11th, and 12th grade among on-time graduates.

*By Robert Balfanz, Rachel Durham, Stephen Plank,
and others.*

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or precursor to the work of the
Baltimore Education Research Consortium (BERC)

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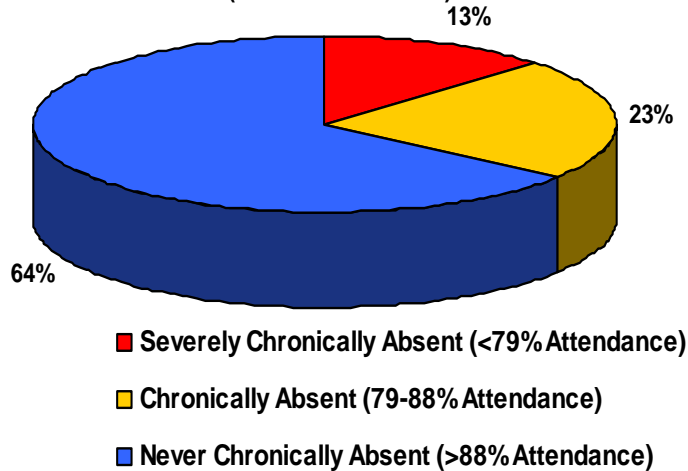
Chronic Absenteeism in the Primary Years

Extent

A little more than one-third of the First Grade Cohort, or 3,236 students, were Chronically Absent during at least one of the first five years they attended BCPSS.

- Thirteen percent of the cohort, or 1,165 students, were severely chronically absent during one of more years.

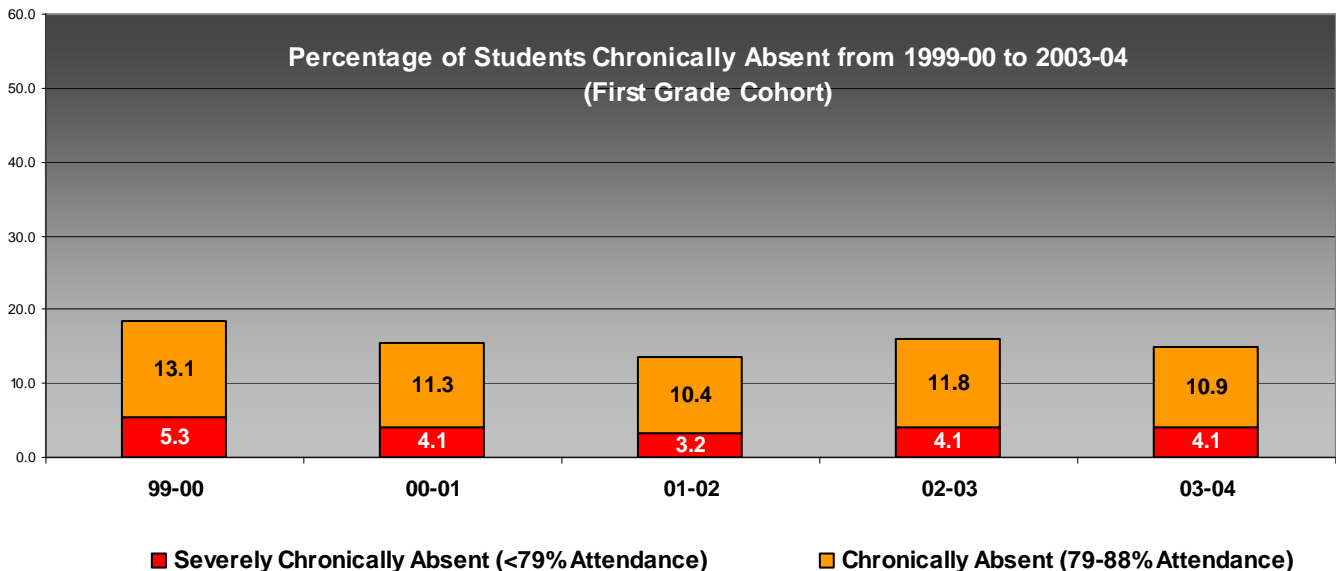
Percentage Students Ever Chronically Absent from 1999-00 to 2003-04
(First Grade Cohort)



Year by Year Trends

The percent of students chronically absent (missed a month or more of school) ranged from 18.4 percent in 1990-00 when the students were in first grade to 15 percent 5 years later when on-time students would be in fifth grade.

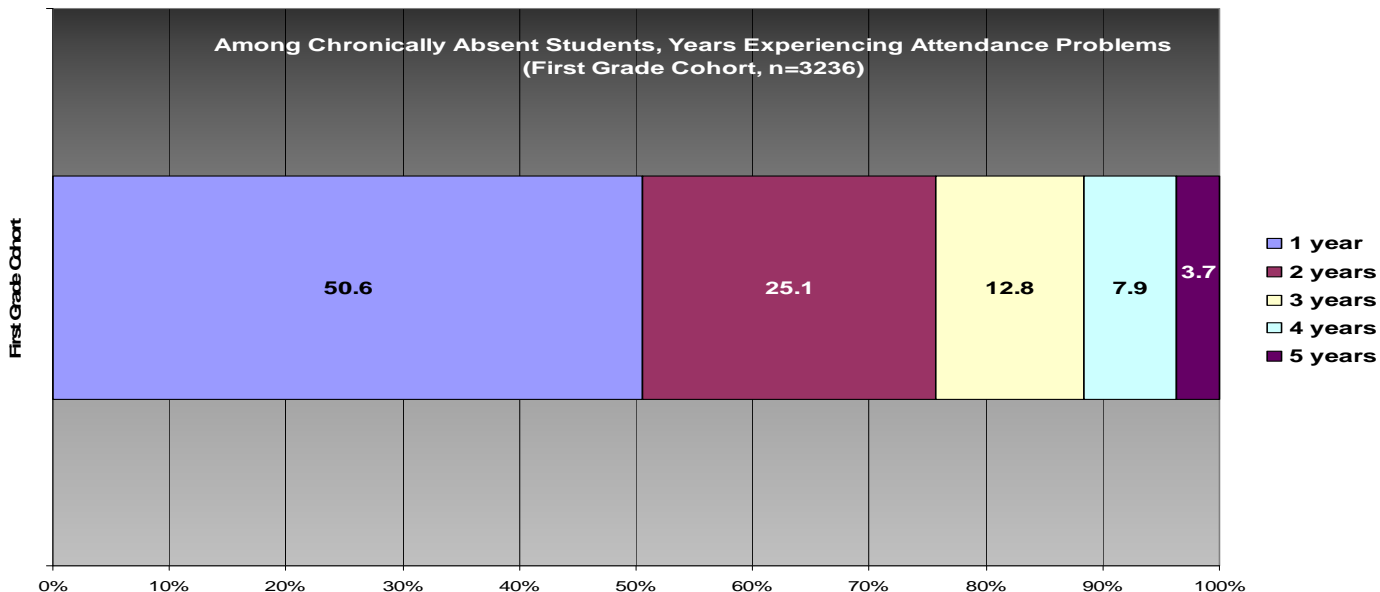
- The percent of students severely chronically absent (missed two or more months of school) ranged from 3.2 percent to 5.3 percent .



Number of Years Chronically Absent

About 51 percent, or 1,639 students of the chronically absent Students in the First Grade Cohort experienced Episodic Chronic Absenteeism. They were only chronically absent in one of the first five years.

About 49 percent, or 1,597, of chronically absent students experienced *persistent* chronic absenteeism. They missed a month or more of school in two or more years of their first five years in BCPSS. Over 11 percent of chronically absent, or 372 students, were chronically absent in four or more of the five years.



Cumulative Days Lost

The 20 percent of primary students (n= 1,322) with the worst attendance missed, on average, 126 days of schooling over a five year period, or 70 percent of a school year.

- The 20 percent of primary students with the second lowest attendance missed, on average, 67 days of schooling over a five year period, or a little more than a third of a school year.
- Forty percent of primary students missed, on average, no more than about a week of school per year.

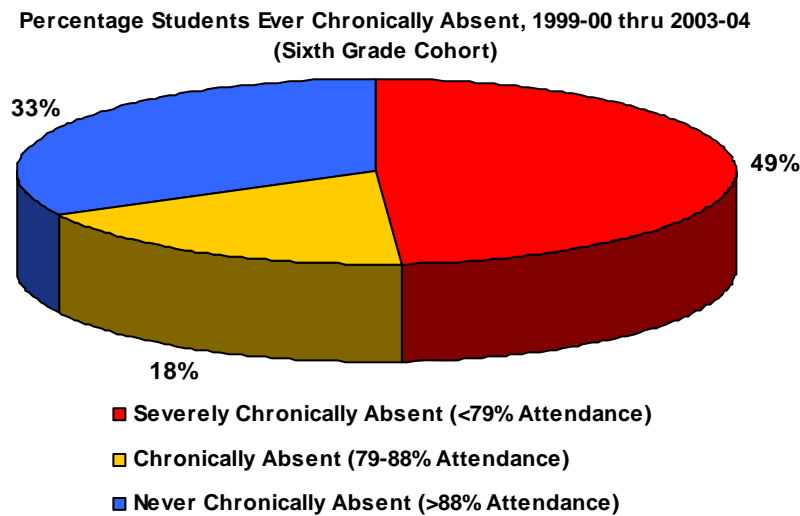
Mean Number of Days Absent, by Absentee Quintile (First Grade Cohort)		
	Mean Days Absent Years 1-5	Mean Days Absent Per Year
Top 20%	10.95	2.19
Upper Middle 20%	27.23	5.45
Middle 20%	43.97	8.79
Lower Middle 20%	67.34	13.47
Bottom 20%	125.90	25.18

Chronic Absenteeism in the Middle and Early High School Grades

Extent

Missing a month or more schooling becomes a common experience for BCPSS students in the early secondary grades (6th-10th). Two-thirds of the sixth-grade cohort (n = 5,760 students) missed at least a month of schooling during at least one year over a five year period from 1999-00 to 2003-04.

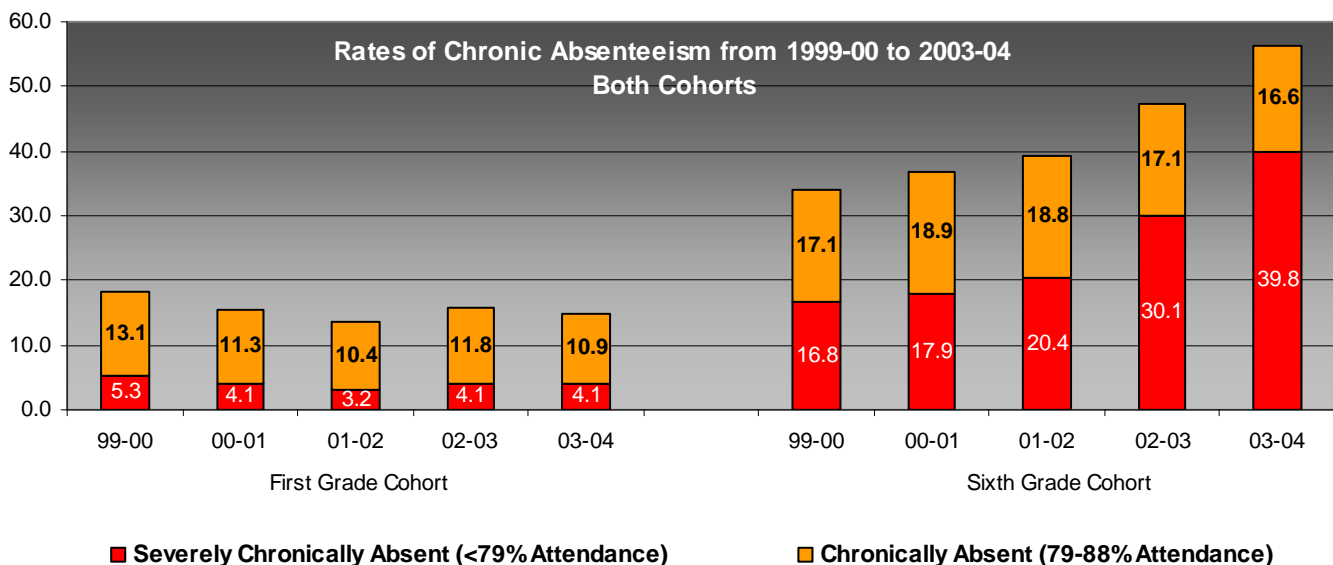
- About half of the sixth-grade cohort (n = 4,182) missed two or more months of schooling during at least one year. This is almost four times as many students who experienced severe chronic absenteeism in the primary grades.



Year by Year Trends

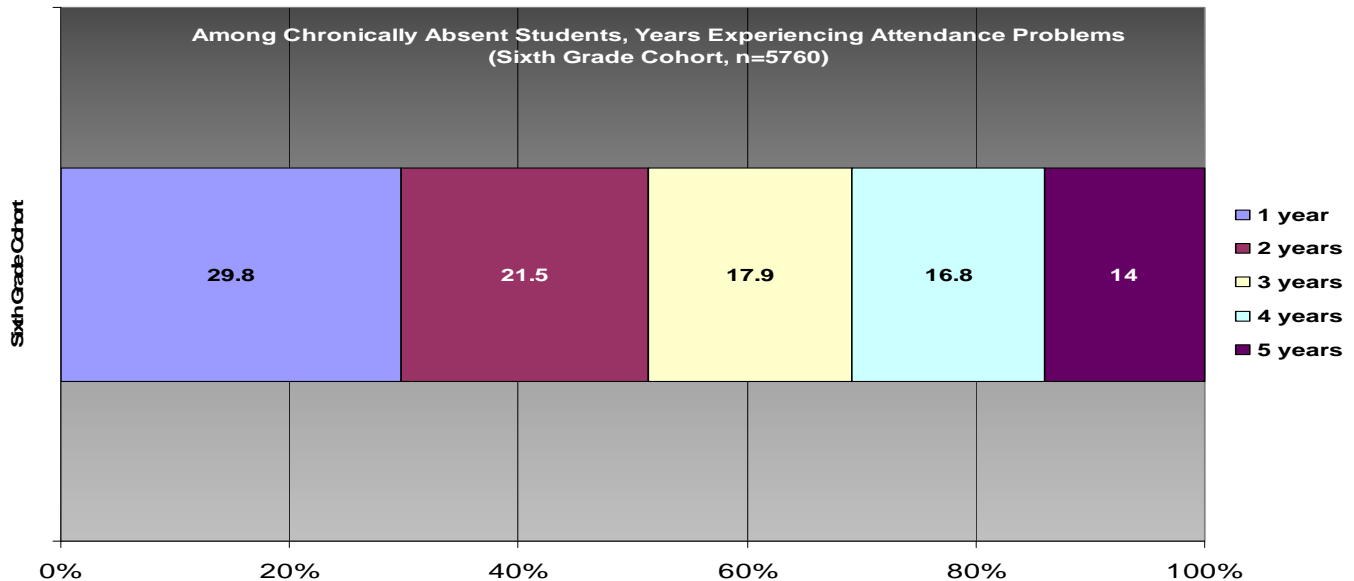
Chronic Absenteeism increased dramatically between fifth and sixth grade. It then continued to grow rapidly year by year until it reached the point where 17 percent of students were chronically absent and 40 percent were *severely* chronically absent five years after the students were in the sixth grade (when on-time students are in the 10th grade).

- The rate of chronic absenteeism is 3.8 times higher in the fifth year of the Sixth Grade Cohort than in the fifth year of the First Grade Cohort.



Number of Years Chronically Absent

Of the 67 percent of the Sixth Grade Cohort who were chronically absent over the first five years, only 30 percent were chronically absent in only one year. Half of chronically absent students were chronically absent three or more years. Fourteen percent were chronically absent every year in the five years since they were enrolled in sixth grade.



Cumulative Days Lost

Forty percent of the Sixth Grade Cohort missed nearly a year or more of schooling over a five year period.

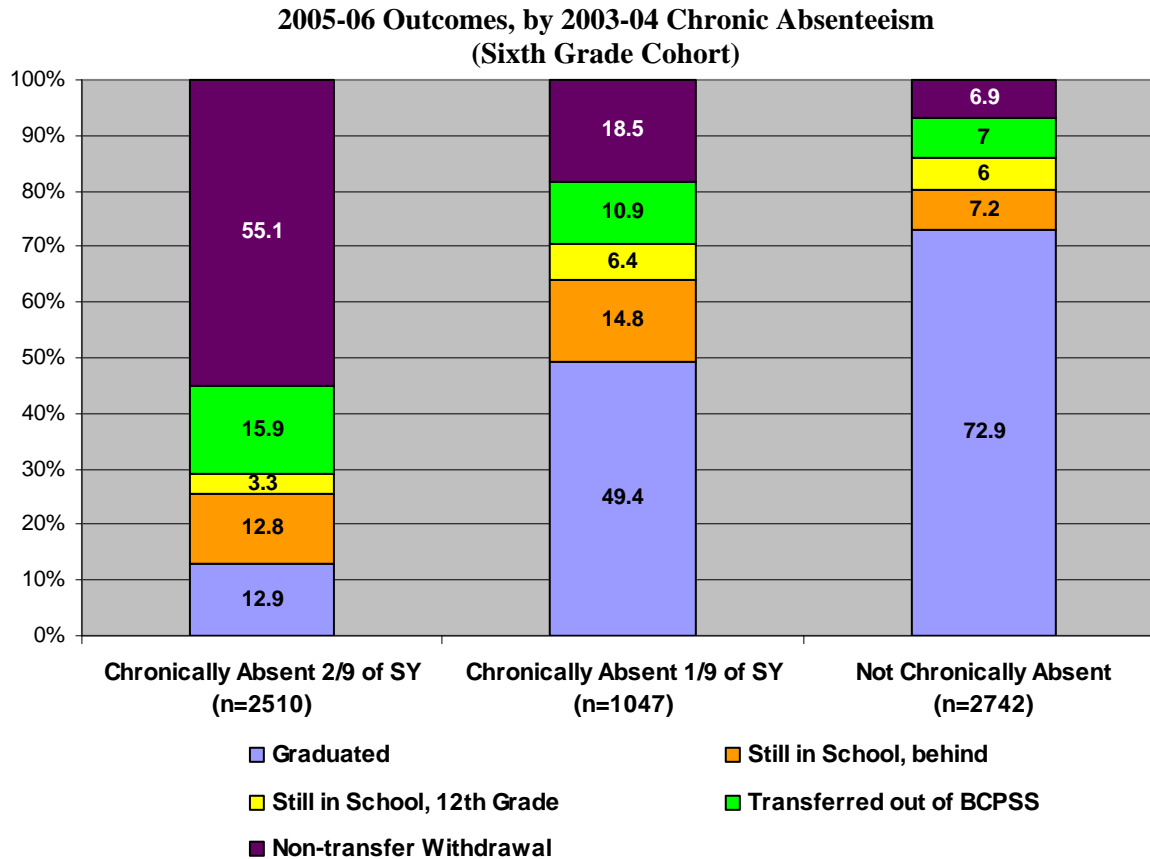
- The 20 percent of students with the lowest attendance in the Sixth Grade Cohort missed an average of one and a half years of schooling over a five year period.
- The 20 percent of students with second-worst attendance rates, on average missed 162 days or nearly a year of schooling.
- By the fifth year, even the 20 percent of students in the Sixth Grade Cohort with average attendance were missing 30 days, or six weeks, of schooling per year.
- Twenty percent of the sixth grade cohort maintained excellent attendance and only missed, on average, a week or less of school over the five year period.

Mean Number of Days Absent, by Absentee Quintile (Sixth Grade Cohort)		
	Mean Days Absent Years 1-5	Mean Days Absent Per Year
Top 20%	23.94	4.79
Upper Middle 20%	56.53	11.31
Middle 20%	97.06	19.41
Lower Middle 20%	162.41	32.48
Bottom 20%	282.24	56.45

Chronic Absenteeism Prior to Dropping Out

Outcomes

Students who are severely chronically absent (i.e., miss two or more months of school in a year) in the early high schools years (9th and 10th grade) have very high dropout and very low on-time graduation rates.



Cumulative Days Lost

Before they depart, many dropouts have already missed enormous amounts of schooling.

- Before they drop out, the majority miss anywhere from a year to a year-and-a-half of schooling from the 6th grade forward.
- Students who after seven years have either graduated or still remain in BCPSS have missed 127 days of schooling, on average, over the six year period.

Total Days Absent Prior to Dropping Out, 2000-01 to 2005-06
(Sixth Grade Cohort)

Year of Dropout:	Average Total Days Absent
2000-01	37.53
2001-02	83.28
2002-03	170.05
2003-04	229.04
2004-05	252.79
2005-06	286.03
Stayed through End of Study	127.02

Year by Year Trends

Before students drop out, most miss progressively more days of school year by year. Many were attending only part time during the year prior to dropping out.

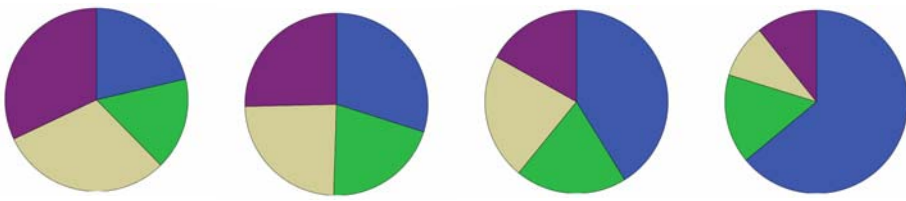
- Three years prior to dropout, attendance begins to decline precipitously.
- By their fifth year in the cohort, most students who dropped out attended school less than 70 percent of the time during the school year before dropping out.

**Attendance Patterns Prior to Dropout
[Days Attended/Days on BCPSS Roll]
(Sixth Grade Cohort)**

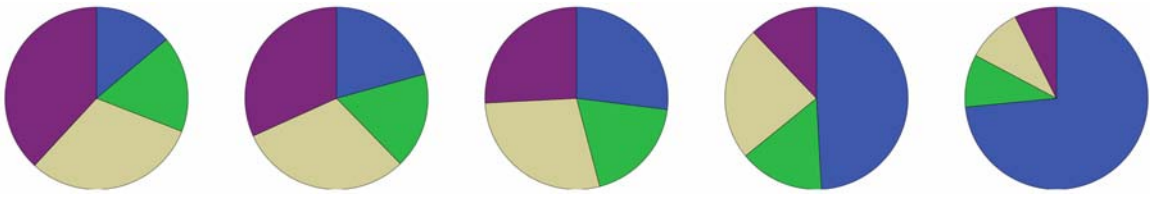


% Attendance 99-00 % Attendance 00-01 % Attendance 01-02 % Attendance 02-03 % Attendance 03-04 % Attendance 04-05

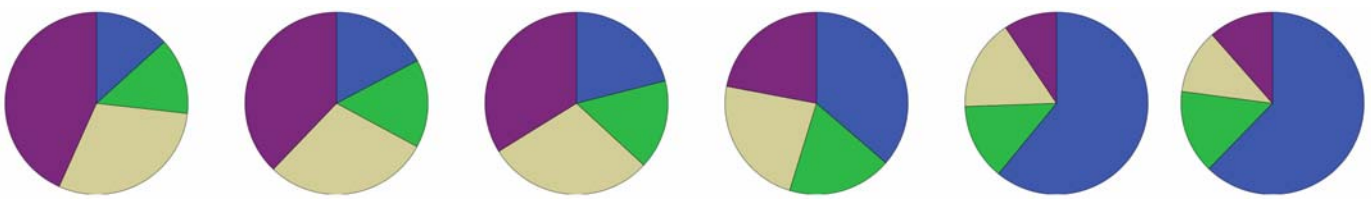
Dropped out
in 03-04
N=412



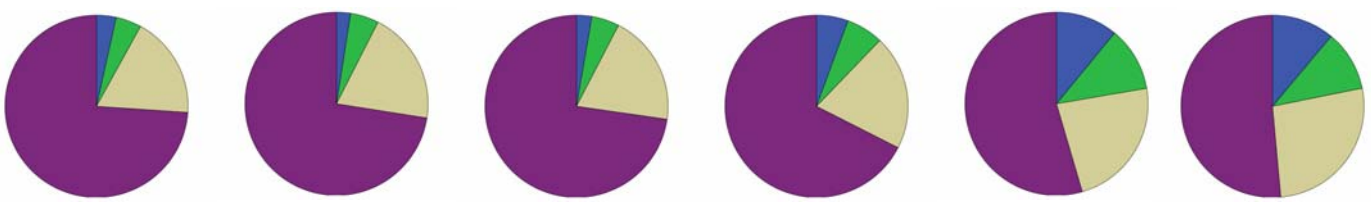
Dropped out
in 04-05
N=744



Dropped out
in 05-06
N=769



Stayed
through end
of study
N=3904



Chronic Absenteeism Among On-Time Graduates

Extent

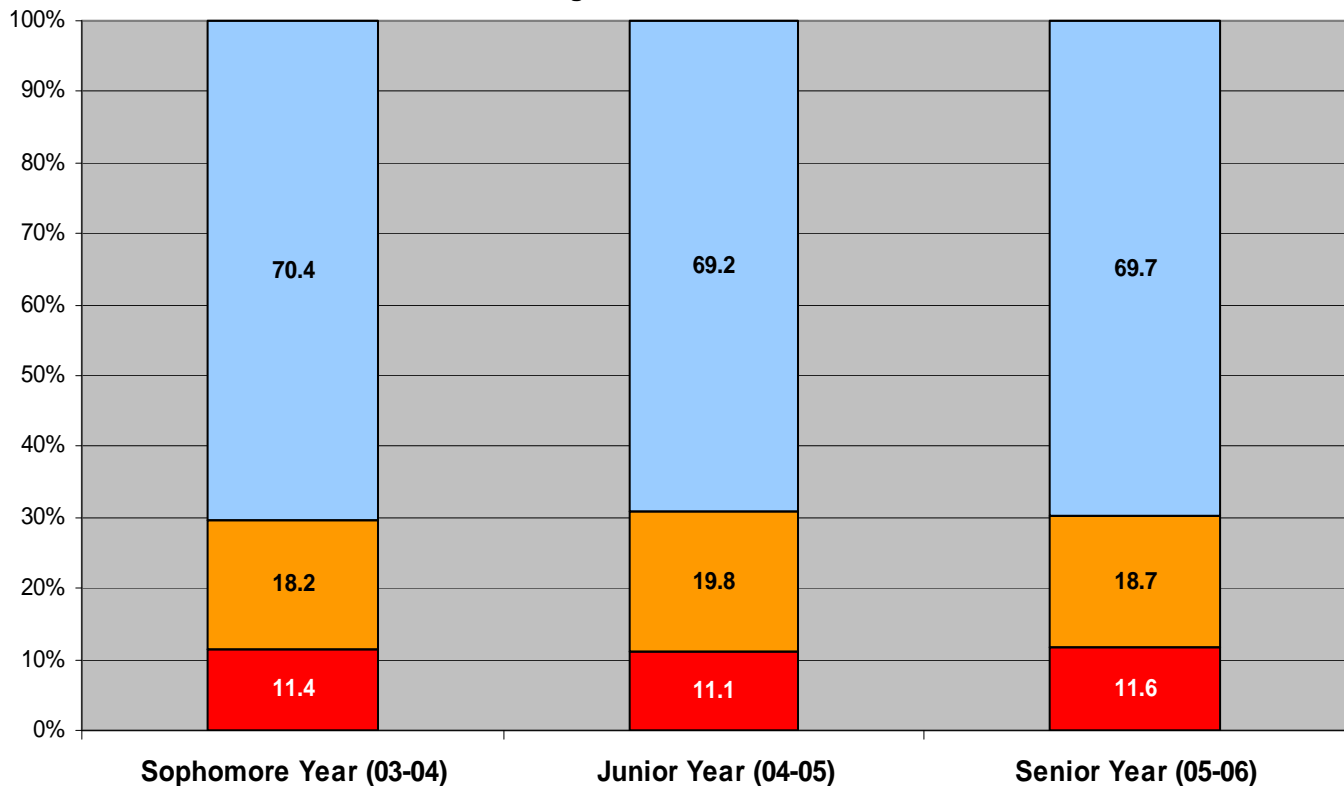
Even among the students in the Sixth Grade Cohort who graduated on time, chronic absenteeism was common. Only 42 percent of the on-time graduates never experienced chronic absenteeism.

- 19 percent of on-time graduates experienced episodic chronic absenteeism (in only one year out of seven).
- 39 percent of on-time graduates experienced persistent chronic absenteeism (in two or more years)
- 14 percent of on-time graduates were chronically absent in four or more of the seven years, from 6th to 12th grade, but were able to maintain on-time promotion from grade to grade and earn enough high school credits to graduate on time.

Year by Year Trends

Chronic Absenteeism among on-time graduates was *not* primarily driven by a “Senior Slump.” Approximately 30 percent of on-time graduates were chronically absent in their sophomore, junior, or senior years. This is nearly double the rate witnessed among primary school students.

Levels of Chronic Absenteeism in Last Three Years of High School
Among On-time Graduates



- Not Chronically Absent (>88% Attendance)
- Chronically Absent (79-88% Attendance)
- Severely Chronically Absent (<79% Attendance)

Magnitude and Duration of Chronic Absenteeism

According to the Maryland State Department of Education School Report Card, a total of 20,647 BCPSS students missed 20 or more days of school in 2007. This breaks down as:

- 4,183 1st to 5th graders
- 6,308 6th to 8th graders
- 10,156 9th to 12th graders

At the larger middle schools and high schools this translates into hundreds of students per school.

Chronic absenteeism is not a new problem in BCPSS. Over the past 15 years, elementary, middle, and high school attendance has remained relatively constant, fluctuating only a few points up or down.

Policy Implications

The data on chronic absenteeism in Baltimore City clearly calls for a comprehensive and multifaceted response. Research and current best practices indicate that a response needs to come from the school system, parents, the community and from the students themselves. Attendance is an issue where schools, families, and communities need to work together to ensure that response matches the magnitude of the problem. The data presented in this brief make clear that chronic absenteeism in Baltimore cannot be turned around through the addition of a few more truant officers, a single new program, or by the school system alone.

The results presented in this brief demonstrate that Baltimore City has three very different chronic absenteeism challenges across grades 1 to 12.

- At the primary level there is a need to focus on the 36 percent of students who are chronically absent at least once during the first five years from first grade forward and the 15 percent of primary students who are chronically absent each year.
- At the early secondary level (grades 6th to 10th) the sheer pervasiveness of chronic absenteeism must be addressed. The majority of students were chronically absent from 6th grade onward, and over a five year period, 40 percent of students in the sixth-grade cohort missed nearly a year or more school.
- In the upper secondary grades (10th to 12th) attention needs to be paid to the 30 percent of on-track students and the 58 percent of on-time graduates who are chronically absent in any given year between 10th and 12th grade.

Questions

In order to devise effective solutions it will be necessary to learn more about why so many students are missing so much school. A number of questions need to be asked about the sources of chronic absenteeism. These might include:

- What is the role played by student health and family health? How many students stay home because of chronic illness or to care for a relative?
- What is the role played by transportation? How many students miss school on cold or rainy days because they do not want to brave the weather through multiple or unpredictable bus connections?
- What is the role played by child-care? How many secondary students miss school to care for younger siblings or ailing adults?
- What is the role played by mental health? How many students miss school because of grief, anger, frustration, or depression?
- What is role played by the need or desire to earn income? How many students miss school to work?
- What is the role played by habit? Missing school is the norm in some of BCPSS's middle and high schools. To what extent is this caused by students doing what they see other students modeling?
- What is the role played by student choice? Are some students simply deciding not to attend school on a given day and getting away with it?
- What is the role played by school safety or safety issues involving getting to and from school? Do some students just want to avoid being bullied?
- What is the role played by students making bad decisions, i.e., deciding to miss school to avoid the hassle of being late, because they have not completed an assignment, or don't want to be called on in class?
- What is the role played by lack of a significant reaction by schools to student absence?
- What is the role played by school suspension?
- What is the role played by parents? And is absenteeism related to the role change from childhood to adolescence as children enter the middle grades or high school?