

Fewer Children Are Attending School, Remotely and In Person

Students of color, those with special needs and elementary school children miss school more often in some states

More children have been absent from school this academic year than a year earlier, with attendance declining as the pandemic wears on, new research and data show.

Students attending school in person as well as those learning remotely are struggling with poor attendance, though it is worse among the millions of homebound students who are still learning primarily through a screen.

Districts showed a 2.3% decline in average daily attendance nationally from September to November of last year, compared with the same period in 2019, according to data from PowerSchool, a company that helps schools track grades and attendance. Attendance fell in 75% of the districts as the year wore on, dropping by 1.5% on average each month, data show. The data covers 2,700 districts that include more than 2.5 million students learning in person and online.

Limited data from some states and districts shows that students learning remotely—especially students of color, special needs and elementary school students—were attending school less often compared with their in-school classmates.

The data deepens concerns that the lengthy school closures will widen the pre-pandemic academic achievement gaps between poor students and others.

About 56% of school districts were exclusively remote as of Dec. 18, according to the Center on Reinventing Public Education, a nonpartisan research group at the University of Washington focused on improving public education in the U.S. The barriers for students learning online continue to include problems with internet connectivity and access to devices.

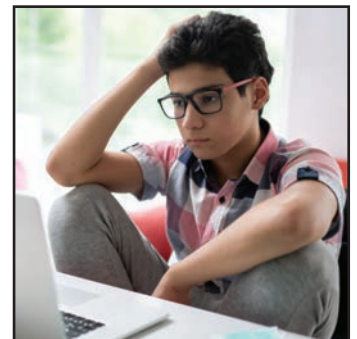
At Providence Public Schools in Rhode Island, where 30% of the district's 22,600 students opted to stay remote in the fall, students learning remotely routinely attended class less often, especially younger students, and received a larger number of poor grades for incomplete classwork, said district superintendent Harrison Peters. About 85% of the students in the district qualify for free or reduced lunch.

The data supports Mr. Peters's initial concerns that students wouldn't be as engaged while learning remotely. Daily attendance for all students, both in-person and remote, is at about 81%, 10 percentage points lower than last year.

About 600 Providence elementary students, a mix of in-person and remote learners, missed more than half of the school days in the month before Thanksgiving, according to the Annenberg Institute at Brown University.

The district has responded by ramping up its communication with parents. It uses Kinvo, a texting service that lets parents know when a student hasn't signed into class. It sent 3.1 million texts between September and

Students attending school in person as well as those learning remotely are struggling with attendance.



December, three times as many transmitted during the same period in 2019.

School officials in Providence have visited the families of students who haven't been showing up to class to offer help, often arriving with supplies such as laptops and Wi-Fi hot spots.

"Our commitment was not to leave that front door, that living room, until we solved many of those challenges," Mr. Peters said.

In California, where many districts remain mostly virtual, an analysis of attendance patterns at 33 districts covering 350,000 students this fall showed that the number of children who missed 10% or more instructional days increased among students in grades two through six, school years during which student attendance is typically reliable, according to School Innovations & Achievement, a California-based company that tracks attendance.

The chronic absence rate across the 33 districts analyzed more than doubled for sixth and seventh-graders to 16.1% and 21.7%, respectively. Across all grades, absentee rates jumped the most among Black and Latino students in December, increasing to 30% and 21%, up from 18.4% and 12.8% respectively, from the same time a year earlier. (View full report at www.sia-us.com)

In Massachusetts, 41% of students who are physically back in school buildings full time strongly agree that they learn a lot everyday, compared with 16% of students who are exclusively remote, according to a Gallup survey of 1,000 high-school students.

Roughly a third of students learning entirely remote or in hybrid arrangements say they are falling behind this year, while 8% of in-person learning students say the same. The survey also found that students from low-income households are more likely to be learning remotely full time than students from upper income brackets.

Taking Attendance

Policies on taking attendance in a virtual environment vary, making it hard to gauge how often students are engaged. Here is a sample of state guidance.

- **ALASKA:** Remote learners must log in to class at least once every two weeks to remain enrolled.
- **CALIFORNIA:** Attendance tracks daily participation in virtual assignments or live interaction with a teacher

or school staff.

- **CONNECTICUT:** Remote students considered present if time spent on activities such as assignments and virtual classes totals at least half of the school day.
- **MISSISSIPPI:** Schools are allowed to reduce instructional day to 240 minutes, down from 330. High-school students aren't required to log in for a specific number of minutes to be considered present.
- **PENNSYLVANIA:** Students must log in, be active in class, and submit class work. State doesn't specify how long students must be logged in.

During a series of virtual town halls in October, in an attempt to incentivize children to improve their attendance, school administrators at William L. Sayre High School in Philadelphia asked students what they wanted, said Jada Warfield-Henry, the school's attendance liaison. The students, who all qualify for free or reduced lunch, responded: food and sneakers.

The school started giving \$20 gift cards to Wendy's, Foot Locker or iTunes to students who achieved perfect attendance in all their classes for a month. The school has spent about \$3,000 on incentives so far this year. About 38.1% of Sayre students attended school for 95% of instructional days in December, compared with 29.7% the previous December.

Remote learning has posed a challenge to measuring attendance.

What used to be a fairly uniform process now varies widely by state, making it difficult to know just how much children are academically engaged. In Alaska, students in distance learning only need to engage with their school at least once every two weeks to maintain enrollment status. California students need to show some kind of daily participation while Connecticut students need to spend enough time in class or doing homework that amounts to at least half the school day.

Mr. Peters, the Providence superintendent, believes that getting students back to in-person learning is the only real solution to the plummeting attendance rates. The district started random testing for Covid-19 in January, its latest effort to make parents more comfortable with sending their children back to school.

View the full report on California's attendance patterns at www.sia-us.com